



How to improve literacy in secondary schools

A practical step-by-step evidence-based guide for subject area literacy

Trish Weekes PhD



Literacy in
Subject Areas



LiteracyWorks
Quality literacy resources
for subject areas

About this resource

If you're reading this ...

you are probably a Principal, Deputy, literacy coordinator, head of faculty or teacher, interested in [improving literacy in your secondary school](#).

Maybe your school's [NAPLAN results](#) are not so good, or you are under pressure to improve students' exam results.

Maybe the students at your school [just don't read any more](#). Or they [can't write clearly, or they don't want to write, or they seem scared of writing, or they can't structure a sentence](#).

Maybe everyone in the staffroom agrees that writing is a problem across the board, but they [don't quite know what to do about it](#).

And you are busy - extremely busy - not to mention the pandemic.

And yet, improving literacy is important for your students in your school, now more than ever.

If that's you,

you are looking for an approach that will work across the school, for all faculties, that is easy to implement and based on evidence and research.

If you're nodding, and all that makes sense, then what you need is:

**a practical, step-by-step guide
for improving literacy in your secondary school.**

Welcome to...

How to improve literacy in secondary schools

And it's free!

This resource contains everything I know about literacy for secondary schools who are starting out their subject-based literacy journey.

This is only a start. If you want to know more, please get in touch.



Yours, in literacy



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How to improve literacy in secondary schools

Contents

Page		
4	Before you start	Pillars for literacy in secondary schools
5	The research behind the approach	The evidence base and research that supports the ideas in this book
6	6 steps to improve literacy in secondary schools	An overview of the steps
7	Step 1	Map the literacy demands of subject assessments
11	Step 2	Write model answers
12	Step 3	Know and teach the genre of the task
18	Step 4	Scaffold writing
22	Step 5	Scaffold reading and vocabulary
31	Step 6	Scaffold speaking like an expert
35	Where to from here?	
36	References	

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Before you start: pillars for literacy in secondary schools

A few foundations should be in place before you start to design and implement a whole school literacy program.

There are some important aspects of the school culture (how you do things) which need to be in place so that a literacy program can really fly (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007).



Sense of shared responsibility	School culture of professional growth	Committed leadership	Literacy as a priority for 3-5 years	An active literacy committee	Familiarity with the data
All teachers in the school (not just the English teachers) understand that literacy is their responsibility. They understand that it is their role to teach subject-based reading and writing.	Regular professional learning sessions occur for faculty groups. Teachers are used to collaborating, learning, trying new strategies in the classroom reflecting, measuring results and continuing to learn.	The Principal, Deputies and faculty leaders demonstrate commitment to literacy – through their words and actions (and in allocation of time and resources).	Schools have many priorities. To be effective, literacy needs to be one of <u>only a few</u> priorities. Time and money need to be available for literacy for 3-5 years.	A cross-faculty literacy committee operates with regular meetings and a common purpose and goals.	Teachers know how to read NAP data and other standardised testing data. They know where their students are now, and which students need specialised support.

If you don't have these pillars in place yet, spend some time prioritising them.

The research behind the approach

The approach to literacy in this document is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a model of language that comes from Australia and is widely used in education (Halliday, 2004/1993). It is based on the ideas that:

- language is a system for making meanings, and
- language depends on the context, that is, who you are, where you are, who you are communicating with and the purpose for communicating.

This is an ideal model for literacy in secondary school subject areas. As we know, each secondary school subject has its own 'significant, identifiable and distinctive literacy' practices (ACARA 2013). SFL a useful theory for understanding the literacies of subject areas, and researchers in this field have been active in identifying these specific and relevant literacies in subject areas (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Humphrey, 2017; Martin & Rose, 2008; Weekes, 2008-2020).

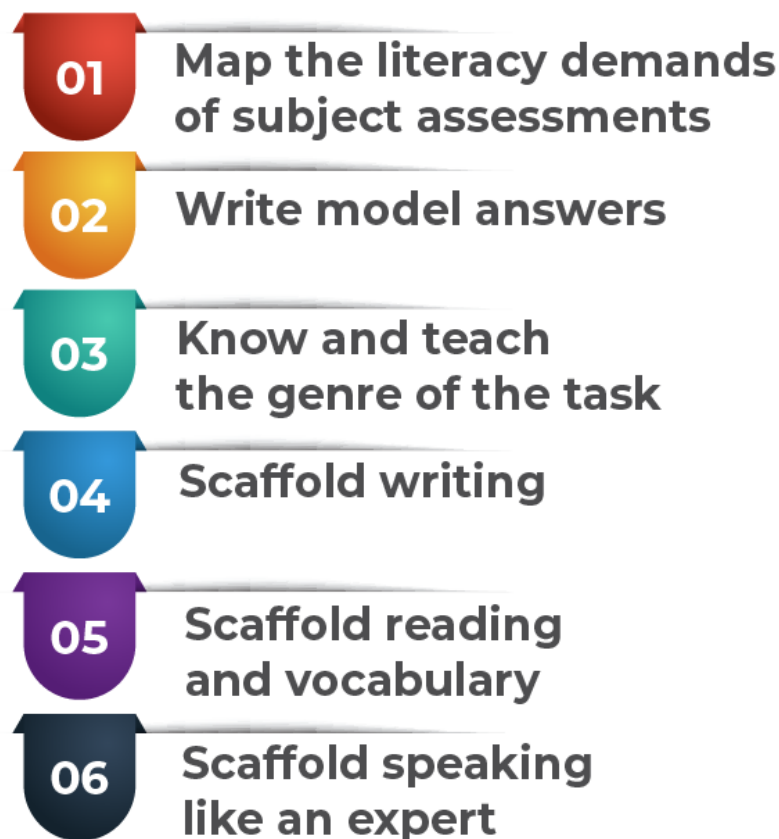
In addition, there is a literacy pedagogy associated with SFL theory that was developed in Australia and is now used all over the world (Rose & Martin, 2012; Rothery, 1994). This pedagogy is based on the idea of scaffolding, where the teacher explicitly teaches the language demands of a literacy tasks, and then gradually withdraws support as students become more proficient.

This research has influenced many Australian curriculum documents. SFL underpins the National Literacy Learning Progressions. The Australian Curriculum closely aligns with SFL principles, especially in the Language, Literacy and Literature strands of the English curriculum (Derewianka, 2012). The scaffolding approach to literacy pedagogy across subject areas is endorsed by learning authorities in New South Wales (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2019), Victoria (Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2020) and South Australia (South Australian Department for Education and Child Development, n.d.). The approach also has a growing influence in Europe, Hong Kong and the UK (Coffin, Acevedo, & Löfstedt, 2013; Forey, 2020). In the USA, it has been applied in many curriculum areas in secondary schooling (Schleppegrell, 2004), it is the recommended methodology for literacy education in California (Spycher, 2017), and it is growing in influence. A recent review identified 136 research articles of SFL being used in schools for teacher education and in classrooms across the USA (Accurso & Gebhard, 2020).

The research basis for SFL is strong and growing. Evidence shows that this Australian-born approach to literacy and professional development lifts teacher confidence to teach literacy and improves student literacy achievement across the curriculum. How to improve literacy in subject areas harnesses the power of the theory of SFL and applies it in a practical way to subject areas in secondary schooling.

6 steps to improve literacy in secondary schools

These six steps will get you going with literacy in secondary school.



These steps are designed to be conducted by school staff, in regular faculty meetings or professional learning sessions, without any external support.

Each step could take a year or a term or half a term. The time taken for each step will depend on your starting situation, how deeply you delve into each step, how much learning teachers need to understand and implement each step, whether you enlist external resources to help, and, of course, depending on pandemics and other unpredictable situations.

The pages that follow outline each step with:

What?	A description of each step
Why?	The rationale based on evidence and research.
How?	A step-by-step guide to implementation, with useful, practical activities that can get you started
When?	When and where to implement this step
Resources	Free templates, activities and ideas for implementation

The six steps shown here are just the beginning. After this, there is room for deeper and more specialised literacy professional development. For more specialised literacy support, contact trish@literacyworks.com.au.



Map the literacy demands of subject assessments

What?

The first step is to make a table of all the assessment tasks for Years 7-10 and then analyse the literacy demands of each task. For this step, teachers collaborate in faculty groups to create a map of all the assessment tasks they already give to students. Then they annotate the table to show the aspects of literacy involved in each task, and then they engage in collegial discussions about the tasks in faculty groups. Some tasks will have no or negligible literacy demands (e.g. a practical task), so these can be left out of the table.

Why?

This step has been designed to be the first step for three main reasons:

1. Looking at the assessment program for the subject helps teachers start thinking about the literacy of their own subject or discipline. Disciplinary literacy means the ways of communicating in the subject area, and how this relates to reading, writing, speaking and viewing (ACARA, 2013; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Making an assessment map and discussing the literacy demands of tasks engages teachers in talk about disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy is a growing area of research which shows how specialised the language of subject areas can be (Brisk, 2015; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Humphrey, 2017; Macken-Horarik, 2012).

2. This task helps to build communities of practice, which are collaborative groups that grow together. They reflect, review and regenerate their current teaching and learning practices based on evidence, and each member contributes and feels empowered (Timperley et al., 2007; Wenger, 2002). The head of faculty takes a leadership role in prioritising the discussion and encouraging collaboration.

Importantly, the subject assessment map is not imposed from outside. It is about the teachers' core work in their subjects, so they are likely to engage in the process. Teachers will participate in a collegial discussion within the faculty about how effective the task is, and what aspects of the task students find challenging. This kind of discussion is wonderful for community building and it focuses teacher attention on reading, writing and other aspects of literacy. And what's best of all is that it is no extra work. Teachers discuss what they are already doing.

3. We start with Years 7-10 because, in those years, there is less pressure and more flexibility to integrate literacy teaching. In senior years, many senior tasks are

mandated by curriculum authorities or geared towards external assessments. It is best to work on senior years after dealing with the junior years.

How?

1. Teachers fill in a table like the subject assessment map example below. Fill it in from a literacy point of view – what are students being asked to write, create, speak? Formative and summative tasks can also be included if you have space. Parts of tasks can be listed.

2. Teachers answer questions about the tasks and colour code.

When?

In faculty meetings or professional development sessions

Resources

1.1. Subject assessment map example

Science assessment map

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Year 7	Investigation report	Research task about zoos and natural habitats; evaluate an animal enclosure	Skills test; explain and describe observations	Scientific report, short answers
Year 8	Skills test – short answers	Science research project	Oral presentation on particle model	Written exam: 3 extended responses
Year 9	First-hand investigation prac and report	Microplastics survey – evaluate data, draw conclusions, make recommendations	Chemistry test: properties of plastics and metals; describe test, justify results	Written exam: 2 extended responses
Year 10	Science research project and investigation report	Multimedia presentation to create public awareness campaign for endangered animal	Physics test, short answers	Evaluate, make judgements about experiments

1.2 Subject assessment map template

Subject:

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Year 7				
Year 8				
Year 9				
Year 10				

1.3 Questions to ask about the assessment map

In faculty groups, engage in a collegial discussion about the assessment program in each year step. Colour code the tasks according to the questions, as shown in the example below.

1. What are our best tasks?

What are our most engaging tasks that students really get into? How can we build on these features to make them even more interesting?

2. What tasks do students find most challenging?

In which tasks did students struggle? How can we teach these more explicitly? How could we change it for next time? Could this be a literacy focus for future professional development sessions?

3. What tasks do students find not challenging enough?

Are there tasks that could be improved to make them more interesting and diverse for students?

e.g. Science assessment map annotations and meeting notes

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Year 7	Investigation report	Research task about zoos and natural habitats; evaluate an animal enclosure	Skills test; explain and describe observations	Scientific report, short answers
Year 8	Skills test – short answers	Science research project	Oral presentation on particle model	Written exam: 3 extended responses
Year 9	First-hand investigation prac and report	Microplastics survey – evaluate data, draw conclusions, make recommendations	Chemistry test: properties of plastics and metals; describe test, justify results	Written exam: 2 extended responses
Year 10	Science research project and investigation report	Multimedia presentation to create public awareness campaign for endangered animal	Physics test, short answers	Evaluate, make judgements about experiments

1. What are our best tasks? Improve by publishing the students' work; ask students in the year above to mentor students' projects.

2. What tasks do students find most challenging? Literacy focus on physics short answers and stages of an investigation report. Extended responses need literacy focus too due to non-attempts by several students.

3. What tasks do students find not challenging enough? Review the zoos task for Year 7 and make it more challenging and engaging. Excursion? Make a virtual zoo?



Write model answers

What?

Teachers write model answers for upcoming written tasks that they give students for assessment (from the assessment map in Step 1). They then evaluate the texts according to their genre.

Why?

With literacy, we have to start somewhere, so we start with writing assessment tasks. In secondary school, written tasks are highly valued as they are the main way that learning is assessed and evaluated. The steps start with writing, and then, reading, vocabulary and speaking come later (Steps 5 and 6).

Writing model answers gives teachers a chance to understand more deeply what they are expecting from students. It gives new insights into the literacy demands of the subject tasks.

Often, teachers find it harder than they expect to write an assignment that they give to their own students. Sometimes, this process helps teachers realise problems or issues with the task and then they can change it and make it better for the future.

It's also a great chance for collaboration between teachers, to build a culture of professional growth. The sample tasks will be used in Steps 3 and 4.

How?

Teachers write a model or sample answer for upcoming assessment tasks. The answer should be in exactly the same format and style as they expect from students: no dot points, no abbreviations, unless that is what they require from students. The teachers should write a text that would achieve full marks for the task from a student in that year step.

Teachers can write in pairs as a collaborative task or write alone and then share with other teachers at a faculty meeting. The faculty can discuss their views on the task and what has been included in the model answer.

The model answer can be used as a benchmark for evaluating the students' responses. It can also be used for the next step: scaffolding writing.

When?

In faculty meetings or professional development time.



Know and teach the genre of the task

What?

In this step, teachers learn more about the disciplinary literacies of their subject areas. They learn about:

- purposes for writing
- language features of the main types of writing that they ask students to do.

The kinds of reading and writing tasks that students do in secondary schooling can be grouped into genre families with common purposes overall.

A genre is a purpose for writing, such as persuading, describing or recounting. Any reading or writing in schooling has a genre, sometimes known as a text type. Knowing the genre can give students an insight into the typical language patterns that commonly occur (Martin and Rose 2008; Derewianka and Jones 2016).

Each subject has its own combination of genres. No subject does all of the genres. However, students do all of the genres, across the curriculum.

The common genres can be shown below.

Genres in secondary schooling



This table provides a basic description of each genre

Genre	What it means
Persuading	Persuading someone to think something or do something; Taking a position; Evaluating and recommending. Types of persuading genres could be expositions (one sided arguments), discussions (exploring many sides), debates and evaluations.
Recounting events	Retelling events that happened, in order. Recounts can be personal, factual or historical.
Describing and reporting	Describing something. Types of reports can describe features or characteristics (descriptive report), types and sub-types (classifying report), or a compare and contrast report.
Telling someone how to do something	Outlining the steps for someone to follow in how to do something, such as Procedures and Methods.
Explaining	Explaining causes and effects and why things happened or happen; Explaining causes and factors that led to a phenomenon or explaining the consequences or outcomes of a phenomenon.
Telling a story	Narratives; entertaining or instructing by telling a story
Responding	Interpreting the themes or messages in a text or artistic work
Inquiring into different aspects of a topic	A text with several sections, each with a different purpose e.g. scientific report, business report, research assignment with different questions

Here is a table of the genres that are typically covered in some subject areas.

Common schooling genres for Years 7-10 by subject area							
	Persuading	Recounting	Describing and reporting	Procedures	Explaining	Narrative	Response
Science							
History							
Geography							
English							
Technology							
Mandatory							
Music							
Visual Arts							
PDHPE							
Languages							

Why?

Genres provide a context for learning about literacy in the subject area. Genres are more specific than 'essays' or 'extended responses.' They show ways that a subject expert communicates in a subject area or discipline.

Knowing about the genre of a task has many advantages for teachers and students:

- Identifying and teaching about genres makes literacy teaching more explicit and visible across the school.
- Subject areas use different genres. Knowing about genre helps students to understand the disciplinary literacies of a subject area.
- Genres have specific and identifiable patterns of language that can be taught and learned. These patterns are specific and explicit and will help students to read and write and communicate like a subject expert.

This step helps teachers to notice and pay attention to what they are asking students to do. Analysing the genre helps teacher to be intentional and deliberate about the tasks and to make sure that they are creating the best possible assessment program for students.

For more specific information on genres of secondary schooling, see the reference list. The information in this document does not delve deeply into the language patterns of genres, as support from a literacy expert might be needed to help teachers learn about these. See 'Going further with genre' below.

How?

1. Look at the genre table above and identify the genres that are important in the subject.
2. The next step is to look at the assessment map and identify the genres in the assessment map, as in the example below.

e.g. Science assessment map annotated for genre

	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Year 7	Investigation report (Inquiry)	Research task about zoos and natural habitats (inquiry); evaluate an animal enclosure (persuasive)	Skills test; explain and describe observations	Scientific report, short answers (inquiry)
Year 8	Skills test - short answers (none)	Science research project (inquiry)	Oral presentation on particle model (persuasive)	Written exam: 3 extended responses (one description, two explanations)
Year 9	First-hand investigation prac and report (Inquiry)	Microplastics survey - evaluate data, draw conclusions, make recommendations (persuasive)	Chemistry test: properties of plastics and metals; describe test, justify results	Written exam: 2 extended responses (two explanation, one persuasive)
Year 10	Science research project and investigation report (inquiry)	Multimedia presentation to create public awareness campaign for endangered animal (persuasive)	Physics test, short answers (none)	Evaluate, make judgements about experiments (description and persuasive)

3. Teachers should analyse the model answers they wrote in Step 2 and identify the genre of their task. They can also make sure that the assignment question or instruction matches the genre they intend for the task. The aim of this step is to make sure that the genre and requirements of the task are agreed by all the teachers and clear and explicit for the students. The list of questions in the table below can help teachers to make sure their intentions are clear for students.

Questions for each genre

Teachers can consider these key questions for each genre and make sure that they explicitly teach the answers.

Genre	Questions about each genre
Persuading	What is the position or point of view that my students need to take? Can students choose a position or is it provided? What kinds of arguments support the position? How much emotion and evaluation should the text contain? Should the students present just one side of the issue or do they cover multiple points of view?
Recounting events	How can students group together the events being recounted? (e.g. by time period, year?) Are students expected to evaluate the significance of the events as well? If so, how do they do this?
Describing and reporting	What are the features or characteristics that will be described? How should the description be organised or structured? What key subject-related vocabulary do students need to know to describe like a subject expert? Is there a graphic organiser that students could use to plan their description or report?
Telling someone how to do something (Procedures)	How many steps are needed? What step of detail is required for how something is to be done?
Explaining	Does the explanation cover: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - causes or factors? - effects or outcomes or consequences? - both causes and effects? - a sequence or explanation of a process? - how a system relates and functions? (Make sure students know the exact type of explaining expected) What kinds of cause and effect language are expected?
Telling a story	What are the key features of the narrative required? How can students use a model (or example) as a springboard for their own ideas for the narrative?
Responding	What are the themes or messages that students need to focus on? Can we build more vocabulary around the theme? (synonyms, related meanings) What are the key effects on the audience that students should cover? How can students link text quotes and examples with the themes/effects?
Inquiring into different aspects of a topic	What is the genre of each section of the longer text e.g. description, explanation, persuasion. Make sure that students know the exact purpose of each.

Going further with genre

This is only the beginning. The real value of knowing about genres comes when teachers know about the language features of each genre too, for example:

- in Science, how to use conditional language to write a hypothesis (if... then) in an experiment report
- in History, how to identify dates and periods of time using nouns (The Renaissance), preposition phrases (in 43 BCE), classifiers (ancient artefacts) in historical accounts.
- in Geography, how to use evaluative language to evaluate liveability of two places in a compare and contrast report
- in English, how to use behavioural processes (verbs) to 'show not tell' in a narrative
- in PDHPE, how to use cause and effect language to explain the influences on body image (in a factorial explanation)
- in Technology Mandatory, how to use evaluative language to evaluate success criteria of designs (in a Folio)
- in Music, how to create expanded noun groups to describe concepts of music e.g. opening violin counter-melody (in a description)
- in Visual Arts, how to describe the elements of art and link them to meanings (in a description)
- in Languages, how to identify phases of a descriptive paragraph and use describers (adjectives) to describe a person (either before or after the noun, depending on the language).

It may be useful for teachers to gain expert support in identifying and learning about the language features of genres, so this is where a literacy consultant might help. However, there is a lot you can do within the school to prepare for learning about language features.

Here are some wonderful resources for more information about the genres, stages and language features in subject areas:

Derewianka, B., & Jones, P. (2016). *Teaching Language in Context. 2nd Edition*. London: Oxford.
Humphrey, S., & Rutherford Vale, E. (2020). *Investigating model texts for learning*. Newtown: PETAA.
Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). *Genre relations. Mapping culture*. London: Equinox.
Weekes, T. (2007-2021). *Literacy Works range*. (see the last page for links to resources for History, Geography, Commerce, Business Studies, PDHPE, HPE, Science, Music, Visual Arts, Drama)



Scaffold writing

What?

This step is about teaching writing in the classroom. Scaffolding means supporting students, then gradually reducing support as student become more proficient (Gibbons, 2009).

In summary, teachers build knowledge of the topic and context before teaching reading and writing. They support students to speak and read in the classroom. Then they give a model text to students and then teach the genre and language features of that text, and then practise writing with students in the classroom before they work alone.

In the 'How' section below, you'll see a version of the pedagogy in four stages: I Do (I show you how), We do (I lead), You Do (together) and You Do (independently).

Why?

Writing becomes more difficult for students in each year of schooling, so teachers need to teach writing in each class and each year (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). As students progress through the years of schooling, writing becomes more complex, in terms of the ideas and knowledge of the subject and also linguistic complexity.

Scaffolding is a proven way to support students to learn literacy (Gibbons, 2009). The teacher is the expert who explicitly teaches aspects of language, a position strongly supported in the research (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016).

Most teachers already do a variety of scaffolding activities in their classes. The pedagogy outlined here is based on the Teaching and Learning cycle, the pedagogy associated with SFL that has a strong research base (Derewianka and Jones 2016; Rose and Martin 2012).

This pedagogy also involves teaching language features of genres to students. Importantly, scaffolding pedagogy that is explicit about language has been shown to be effective in improving the quality of student writing (Forey, 2020; Myhill, Jones, Watson, & Lines, 2013; Rose & Martin, 2012).

The more that teachers know about the language features of a text, the better their scaffolding. The real value in literacy comes when teachers understand the purposes for writing and the language features of every text they want students to write (or read or speak about). To build teacher knowledge of these language

features across the curriculum, expert literacy support might be needed. But there is a lot that can be done before that, as shown here, and also in the next steps.





How?

Teachers choose texts to teach then they use the scaffolding process shown below in the classroom.

4.1 Prepare the texts to use

Teachers choose a short text, such as a paragraph to try first. Teachers prepare what they want to teach students about in the texts. If teachers know about language features, they should include the language features that they will focus on.

Teachers need to think of four texts: in this case, four paragraphs. There are several examples below of 4 texts that might be suitable for different subject areas

Model text	Text for teachers to lead in writing on the board	Text for students to write in groups	Text for students to write independently
I do	We do (I lead)	You do together	You do
A model text which demonstrates all the features of a task students will write; students read and deconstruct the text with the teacher.	A class text for the teacher to write with students on the board. This will be a new topic based on the model text.	A text that students write in groups on posters on a new topic based on the model text.	A text that students write independently (that is, on their own, without support) based on the model text
1 	2 	3 	4 

4.2 How the four texts connect

The texts used in each stage of scaffolding are similar but not the same. Each text is the same length with similar language features, but a slightly different topic. Here are some examples for subject areas:

The genre chosen as an example here is a Description paragraph. Usually a genre is a page long, not just a paragraph. But these examples are simple just to explain the concept. As you can see, the texts are similar but not exactly the same.

	Model text	Text for teachers to lead in writing on the board	Text for students to write in groups	Text for students to write independently
<i>Topic examples from Year 7 and 8</i>	I do	We do (I lead)	You do together	You do
	1	2	3	4
Science: Describe properties of Metals	Describe malleability	Describe electrical conductivity	Describe ductility	Describe thermal conductivity
History: Describe gods of Ancient Rome	Describe Jupiter	Describe Apollo	Describe Neptune	Describe Mars
Geography: Describe aspects of liveability	Describe access to transport	Describe access to entertainment	Describe access to retail	Describe access to green spaces
English: Novel study	Describe character 1	Describe character 2	Describe character 3	Describe character 4
Technology Mandatory: Research on tiny houses	Describe Tiny House 1	Describe Tiny House 2	Describe Tiny House 3	Describe Tiny House 4
Music: listening: pitch	Describe the pitch in a short excerpt	Describe the pitch in Excerpt 2	Describe the pitch in Excerpt 3	Describe the pitch in Excerpt 4
Visual Arts: structural frame (line)	Describe the use of line in Artwork 1	Describe the use of line in Artwork 2	Describe the use of line in Artwork 3	Describe the use of line in Artwork 4
PDHPE: Self and Relationships	Describe physical bullying	Describe social bullying	Describe cyber-bullying	Describe verbal bullying
Languages (name, age, gender, job)	Describe person 1	Describe person 2	Describe person 3	Describe person 4

Scaffolding writing needs to happen as often as possible. Ideally, students should practise writing like this regularly, in every subject area.

When teachers have done a few of the paragraph-based texts together, then they can try longer texts.

When?

Teachers need time to plan and write these texts before teaching during professional development time or faculty meetings. It can be helpful if teachers collaborate with at least one colleague and they write and plan together.

Teachers need to choose the right time to teach a lesson like this (that is, when students are most alert and cooperative, not Friday afternoon). Implementation should take around one lesson.

Then teachers can debrief about their experiences and report back as a faculty.

Supporting longer written assessment tasks

The model texts that were written in Stage 2 can become the basis of scaffolding writing tasks. Of course, the students should not see the final task that they are asked to write for assessment. Instead, teachers can write different model texts based on the assignment they are planning to give out, or they can change the focus of the final task so they can show the model they have written to students.



Scaffold reading and vocabulary

What?

This step asks teachers to re-evaluate how they teach reading. We need to teach reading, in every subject, not just expect students to be able to read. Each subject has its own specialised texts that students need to read, such as these examples:

- Science – experiment reports, graphs, tables, research papers
- History – sources, text books
- Geography – field reports, graphs, data, case studies
- English – novels, poetry, plays
- PDHPE – graphs, data, case studies about health, reports about health
- Music – descriptions of music
- Visual Arts – reviews of art, artist statements
- Languages – descriptions of places, travel ads, dialogues

Teachers select texts that students need to read and choose from a range of reading strategies to explicitly teach these strategies to students.

Why?

Reading becomes more complex and challenging as the years of schooling progress. From Year 7 onwards, subjects become more specialised and so the reading and vocabulary involved with subject areas become more challenging for students (Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Weekes, 2021). In terms of reading and vocabulary development, a useful way of considering these was proposed by Paris (2005), in terms of constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained skills are easily mastered, such as learning simple words, while unconstrained skills, such as subject-area vocabulary, continue to develop over many years, even into adulthood. This supports the need for explicit teaching of reading and vocabulary in every year and in every subject throughout secondary schooling.

Students need to be taught to read the disciplinary texts of the subjects they study, and also how to use a range of reading strategies depending on their purpose (e.g. research, locating information, following instructions etc). The research on reading shows that there are multiple skills involved in reading, including understanding the context, decoding, predicting, comprehending, learning vocabulary and remembering (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Ehri et al., 2001; National Reading Panel, 2000). According to the four resources model, reading involves understanding the purpose and context of what is being read, knowing the meaning of words on the page, knowing what to do with what is read, and also being critical readers (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

Reading is connected to writing development. Research shows that reading informs the development of writing, and writing can influence reading development (Shanahan & Lomax, 1986). Importantly, literacy instruction can have a big impact on reading improvement. Meaning-based reading activities have been shown to improve reading as well as writing achievement (Rose & Martin, 2012).

For these reasons, there is no evidence to support the teaching of vocabulary or of reading comprehension as stand-alone activities. Instead, vocabulary and reading and writing should be taught together, in disciplinary contexts.





How?

5.1. Curate the readings for a unit of work

Teachers work with a colleague to review a unit of work that they both teach. Teachers look at what students are required to read in that unit of work (e.g. text book, articles, case studies etc). Teachers curate the readings carefully and select a few key readings to focus on during the unit.

5.2 Teachers choose and plan reading strategies to explicitly teach reading.

The ways for teaching reading are shown in the table below.

I do	We do (I lead)	You do together	You do
Teacher models reading 'think alouds' for the class, revealing thinking while reading a class text on the board or working out what vocabulary means.	Teacher guides students to use different reading strategies (e.g. Activity 1), to read with meaning (e.g. Activities 2 and 3) and to identify key vocabulary in a text (e.g. Activities 4-6).	Students collaborate on reading activities and participate in active reading in groups.	Students read independently
1 	2 	3 	4 

5. 3 Questions about reading for teachers to consider

In faculty meetings, teachers could consider these questions for the reading in each unit of work:

- How do we teach students how to research and read to prepare for an assignment or research task?
- Can we provide a template or practise reading strategies for articles/ case studies etc?
- Could we provide a selection of good articles that students can choose from so they don't waste time looking at the wrong sources?
- Could we model reading the sources using I do, We do, You Do (in the table above)?
- What reading strategies could teach students for particular texts we are asking them to read in the unit
 - skimming
 - scanning
 - detailed reading
 - predicting
 - using graphic organisers
 - note taking (using a template)
 - noting references.

Resources

On the next pages are 6 reading and vocabulary activities that you could use in your subject area. There are many more possibilities – these are just a start.

Reading activity 1

Reading activity 2

Reading activity 3

Vocabulary activity 1

Vocabulary activity 2

Vocabulary activity 3

Reading activity 1

Skim and scan for purpose



Preparation time:

5 minutes. Locate 3 different readings on the same topic. Take an excerpt from each reading and put them in a table, like the one below.



Purpose:

This tool helps students to read strategically to save time and to learn how to read for purpose.

Give students three texts related to the topic they are researching for an assignment.

One text should be suitable for the topic. One text should be related but not that suitable, and another text should be unsuitable.

Show the texts on a slide so that students only have a limited time to see it. They should not read every word in detail, just lightly skim it and read the headings.

Ask the students which texts they would read in detail and use for their assignment, and why.

e.g. Business Studies assignment – research the influences on NSW businesses

<p>Article 1: Lower NSW electricity network prices will ease cost pressures on business NSW Business Chamber</p> <p>The Illawarra Business Chamber (IBC) says the Australian Energy Regulator's (AER) decision not to change its final determination on electricity network prices in New South Wales will ease cost pressures on business and ensure energy providers are operating the networks as efficiently as possible.</p> <p>Annual electricity bills for small businesses are expected to reduce by approximately 5 per cent for 2015-16, an average saving for business of around \$270.</p> <p>https://www.nswbusinesschamber.com.au/Media-Centre/Latest-News/May-2015/Lower-NSW-electricity-network-prices-will-ease-cos</p>	<p>Article 2: Productivity Commission report finds obstacles on young people's career paths Newcastle Herald</p> <p>Young people have for years struggled to find employment in their desired field or commensurate with their education, leading to long-term negative effects on their career path, a new report concludes.</p> <p>The Productivity Commission's Climbing the jobs ladder slower report paints a grim picture for graduates and young people with an analysis of employment data between 2008 to 2018.</p> <p>https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/6852092/young-people-finding-it-almost-impossible-to-climb-the-job-ladder/?cs=4200</p>	<p>Article 3: Setting up home offices has cost \$2 billion Australian Financial Review</p> <p>The shift to remote work has been praised for many things, but it has one big downside: more than half of us are working longer hours than we were pre-COVID-19.</p> <p>More than 50% say that their work life balance has taken a hit since working from home, according to a report from freelance marketplace Fiverr.</p> <p>https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/20200923-p55y7v</p>
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Reading activity 2

Here, Hidden, Head Comprehension



Preparation time:

5-10 minutes. Teachers think of 3 examples of questions at different levels for a text your class is reading.



Purpose:

This task helps students with literal and inferential comprehension. Students can learn to build their critical thinking and reading skills.

Ask three kinds of questions about a text. Start with here (literal) questions, move to hidden and then to head questions. Discuss in groups and then as a class.

Here

the meaning can be found directly on the page (literal)

HERE



*What is the meaning of this word?
What happened?
What is the evidence for this statement?*

Hidden

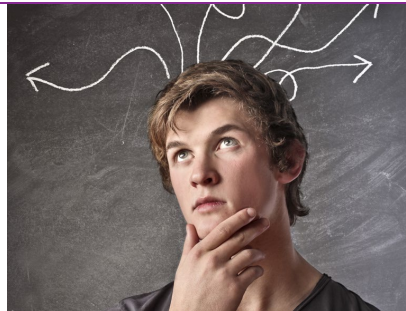
interpretation is needed; there are clues in the text to help you find the answers but they are not exactly on the page



*How can you tell the character is upset?
Why is this a problem?
How can you tell the author's position on this issue?
What does this metaphor mean?*

Head

the meaning is in the reader's head; the reader has to use their own knowledge to infer reasons, consider implications, take a critical position (inferential)



*Why ...?
How could you apply this to another situation? Do you think this is reasonable?
Why do you think the writer chose to include this?
What does this suggest/ imply?*

Example: **Technology Mandatory**

Artificial intelligence is about building machines that can think and act intelligently, such as a self-driving car or Google's search algorithms. While most technology is used to impact humankind positively, any powerful tool can be harmful if it falls into the wrong hands.

Here: What is artificial intelligence? What are two examples of artificial intelligence?

Hidden: What are the positive impacts of technology for humans? How could a self-driving car have a positive or negative impact? What does 'the wrong hands' mean?

Head: Why do you think some people are afraid of new technology? How have they developed these fears?

Reading activity 3

Synonyms Clues



Preparation time:

15 minutes. Find a short text and underline important wordings that students will need to know. Draw some speech bubbles around the text. Copy for each student.



Purpose:

This task helps students to understand how academic language works and how to understand technical, subject-specific language..

Students receive a short text with some wordings underlined. Students will create questions that might help other students understand the word or wording.

e.g. What is the topic of this paragraph. Carbohydrates

e.g. What words show that they make up the main parts of the cell? structural components

Their clue should be a synonym, not using the exact words, starting with 'What words mean...?' or 'What is/are?' Talk through a few examples with students, as shown, then ask them to write questions for the rest of the underlined words.

What is the topic of this paragraph?

What words show that they are the parts that make the shape of the cell?

What words mean that they keep the resources the plant needs for survival?

What word states the type of cell?

What words mean links of sugar?

What are the three types of atoms?

Carbohydrates form the structural components of plant cells and are important energy storage. They are made of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms, joined together in long chains of glucose molecules. Carbohydrates are the major component of most plants. Plants use carbohydrates, made via photosynthesis, as an energy source and for forming support material. Animals consume carbohydrates in their diet, gaining both energy and a source of fibre.

What words mean links of sugar?

What words mean that they keep the resources the plant needs for survival?

What are the three types of atoms?

What word states the type of cell?

What is the topic of this paragraph?

What words show that they are the parts that make the shape of the cell?

Vocabulary Activity 1

Doodle word



Preparation time:

1 minute. Identify five or six important vocabulary terms in your subject or topic.

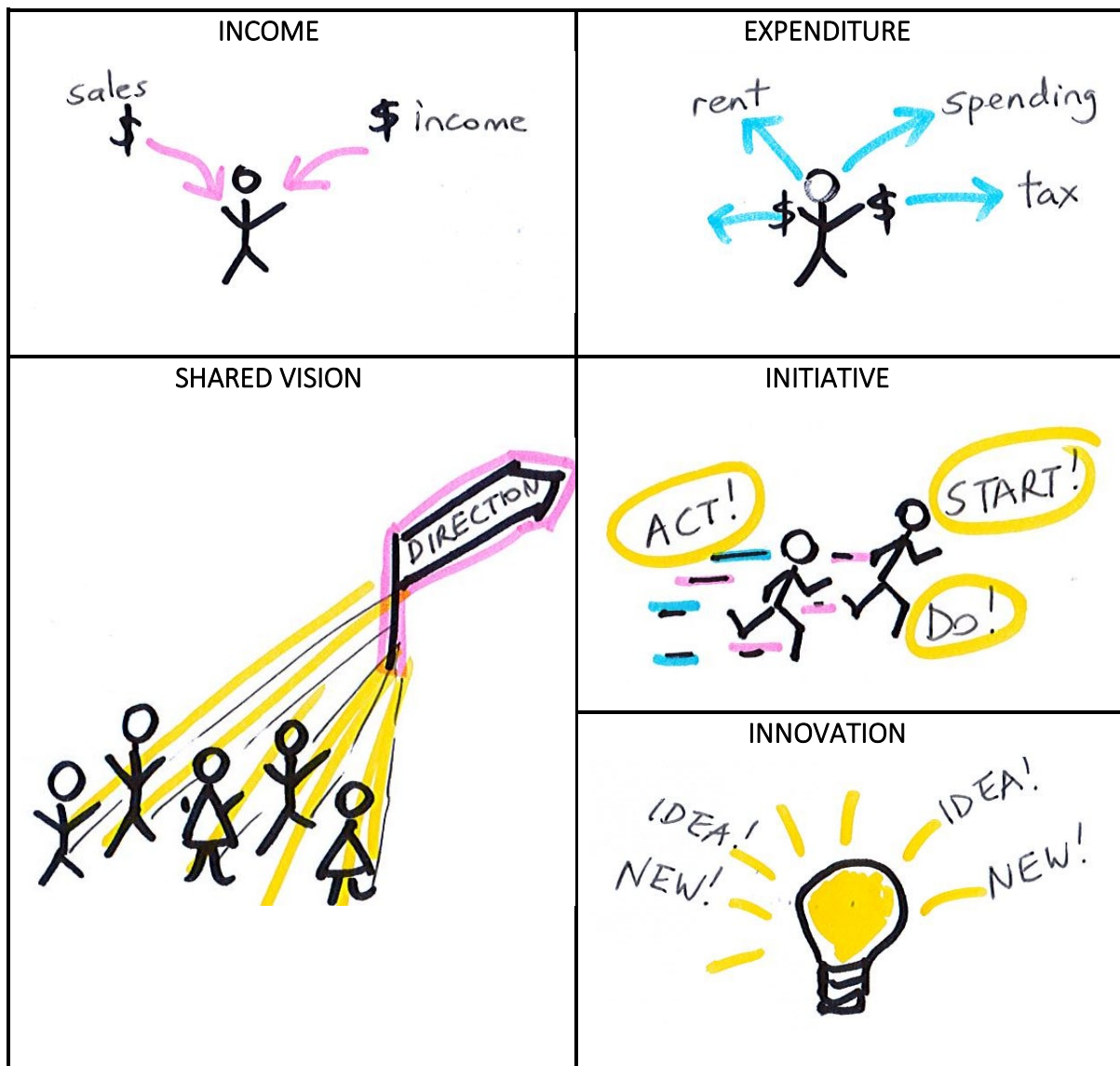


Purpose:

This tool builds students' understanding of words and their meanings and relationships with other vocabulary from the same topic.

Students have to draw the meanings of several words related to a topic. It is important that students do NOT search online for images in this activity. They should draw in order to truly engage with the meaning of the terminology. If they are shy about drawing images, stick figures are fine.

Here is an example for key words related to Economics and Business.



Vocabulary Activity 2

How words are related


Preparation time:

1 minute. Identify a text that is important for your topic. It should be at least a paragraph long, and it should contain many key vocabulary terms.


Purpose:

This tool builds students' understanding of the relationships between words and it helps them pay attention to the patterns of meaning in a text.

An effective way of teaching vocabulary is to teach patterns of words that belong together. Words have relationships, such as synonyms (similar meanings) and antonyms (opposite meanings).

Students can colour code different words (e.g. synonyms are red, antonyms are blue). You can give students a table like the one below and they write their own examples from the text.

Example:

Rainforests are forests with high rainfall. Due to the high rainfall, the soil is fertile and many living things can exist there. The top layer of a rainforest is the emergent layer, or very tall trees. The canopy layer contains the majority of large trees and it has dense foliage (leaves). The understory layer lies between the canopy and the forest floor. The forest floor is the bottom layer. It only receives a little sunlight so it is clear of vegetation.

Relationship	Definition	Examples (for students to fill in)
synonyms	words with similar meaning	top, emergent, very tall floor, bottom foliage, leaves, vegetation, trees floor, layer
antonyms	words with opposite meaning	dense/ clear of vegetation
hyponymy	types and sub-types	forest: (one type of forest is a) rainforest two types of trees are mentioned: very tall, large
meronymy	parts of a whole	layers of a rainforest: emergent layer, canopy layer, understory layer, forest floor
collocation	words that belong together and are typically found together	forest, leaves, trees, layer, vegetation rainforest, rainfall, fertile, living things

Vocabulary Activity 3

Forbidden word game



Preparation time:

1 minute. Find a vocabulary list from your topic. The words should be ones that students already know



Purpose:

This tool helps students to build their comprehension of vocabulary terms by thinking of definitions and explanations.



Each student has to help his/her team mates to guess the meaning of a word. They cannot say the actual word, so it is a forbidden word. Instead, students practise paraphrasing and using synonyms for key vocabulary terms.

Preparing for the game

- Divide students into groups of 4.
- Write several key vocabulary terms on slips of paper and place them face down on the table.

The game

- Each student takes the same number of slips of paper (e.g. 4 each). They keep the word they have chosen secret from the rest of the group.
- One student starts. He or she gives the team clues and the team has to guess the word they have. Clues can be definitions or synonyms.

e.g.

quadrilateral

Clues

- It's got 4 sides
- An example is a square.
- The base word means 4 in Latin

vertices

Clues

- The point where the edges of a square or triangle meet
- It's an angular point

- When a team member guesses the word, the 'turn' moves to the next person.
- The game ends when each group/team has correctly worked out all the words.



Scaffold speaking like an expert

What?

In this step, students practise speaking like subject experts. Many students speak in a casual way in the playground and this is very different from how they will be expected to write in subject area assessments.

Rather than just talking during brainstorming, this step involves helping students to speak like a subject expert, in a way that is close to writing. There's nothing wrong with brainstorming or chatting about topics. This step involves raising students up to a more academic and disciplinary way of talking.

For example, in Geography, spoken talk might be: 'Well it's kind of like how close you are to trains and bus stops and that might make somewhere more liveable'. Instead, we want expert speaking that is more similar to writing, such as 'Access to transport is a factor that influences liveability.'

Why?





There is a huge difference between spoken language and writing. Students can often speak about a topic but they may struggle to write about it. Written language is more formal, more technical and abstract and more compressed than spoken language.

Research shows that oral language skills are foundational for other aspects of literacy, such as reading and writing. Oral language continues to develop throughout the years of schooling and into adulthood (Loban, 1976). Oral and written language seem to develop in parallel, with oral language paving the way for later writing (Funnell, Hughes, & Woodcock, 2006; Nippold, Mansfield, & Billow, 2007; Owens, 2012). A large body of socio-cultural research has highlighted the importance of classroom talk for learning, as students interact with the teacher through oral language, as they build understanding of subject areas (Alexander, 2008; Freebody, 2013; Koole, 2015; Mercer & Howe, 2012).

For these reasons, students can benefit immensely from activities that help students speak like a subject expert. This builds understanding of subject content, and it helps to bridge the gap between casual conversation and academic writing.

How?

Teachers design activities that encourage speaking in the classroom, based on scaffolding.

I do	We do (I lead)	You do together	You do
Teacher does speaking 'think alouds' for the class, revealing thinking while preparing to speak like an expert using subject-based vocabulary.	Teacher guides students in speaking activities (e.g. Activity 1). Teachers model an example before giving students examples to do.	Students collaborate on speaking activities (e.g. Activity 1 and 2)	Students speak like an expert independently
1 	2 	3 	4 

One suggestion is to use speaking prompts for the ways that students will need to speak like a subject expert in full sentences.

e.g. Properties of metals in Science

- What is the name of the property? (A property of metals is malleability.)
- What is the definition? (Malleability is the ability of a substance to be beaten or bent into shape.)
- What are some examples? (Examples of malleable metals are copper and silver.)
- How can scientists test for the property? (Scientists can test for the property by beating with a mallet or trying to bend a substance.)

e.g. Music – features of pitch

- What is the name of the shape of a melody? (The shape of a melody is its contour)
- What is the definition? (Contour means whether it ascends or descends in each musical phrase.)

Resources

On the next pages, you will find two more suggestions for speaking activities.

Speaking Activity 1

Speed chatting



Preparation time:

5 minutes. Think of 5-6 open ended questions related to your topic or text.



Purpose:

This task helps students engage with the context and relate the reading text to what they already know. All students in the class engage with every question.

- Arrange your students in two concentric circles. The students in the inner and outer circles should face each other so they each have a partner.
- Give students a time limit of to answer a question – 30 seconds for each student to speak, a total of 60 seconds per question.



- Ask a question. Students take turns in answering, for 60 seconds. Then students in the inner circle move one space to the left. Each student should have a new partner.

Example: Deforestation

1. Have you ever been to a forest? What was it like?
2. What facts do you know about forests?
3. What lives in forests, besides trees?
4. Why are forests important?
5. Why are some forests destroyed?
6. What are the benefits and problems if forests are destroyed?

Example: Australian identity

1. Where have you travelled in Australia? What was it like there?
2. What do you think of when you hear the word 'Australia'?
3. Do you think Australians are different to other nationalities, such as English or Spanish people?
4. What do you know about stereotypes of Australia? To what extent are they true?

Speaking Activity 2

Speak about an object or diagram



Preparation time:

5 minutes. Find an object related to the topic you are teaching or find a diagram that represents the core content of your lesson.



Purpose:


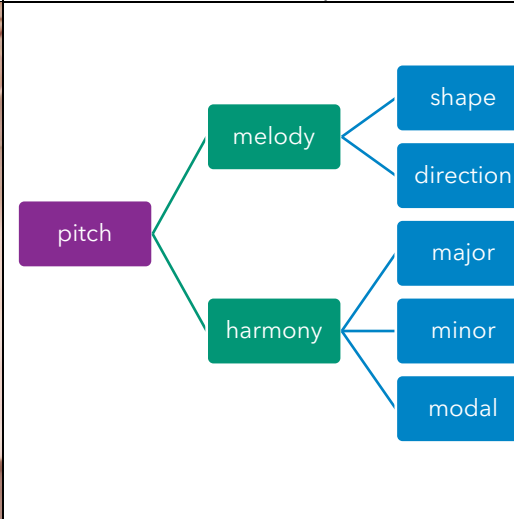
This task helps students to speak like an expert about their subject. Instead of using everyday talk, they should use academic, subject-based talk.

Give students an object, diagram, model, timeline, photographs or concept map.

Engage students in meaningful subject-based talk. Ask them to talk in pairs and:

- explain the parts and how they work together
- explain the process
- describe what the object is or means
- describe how the object relates to the topic or issue being studied.

Students can rehearse their verbal explanation and then talk to the teacher, to the class, to another group of students. They should be encouraged to speak like a subject expert.

Talk about a model in Science	Talk about the concepts of Music
	 <pre> graph LR pitch[pitch] --> melody[melody] pitch --> harmony[harmony] melody --> shape[shape] melody --> direction[direction] harmony --> major[major] harmony --> minor[minor] harmony --> modal[modal] </pre>

Where to from here?

More to learn

The more that teachers know about genres, language features and teaching strategies for literacy, the greater the improvement for their students. Learning about language is challenging for many teachers, but it is worthwhile. This page shows two additional resources for secondary school teachers in improving literacy across the curriculum.

Literacy resources for subject areas

If you would like more help and support, you can buy Literacy Works literacy resources based on scaffolding for subject areas.

literacyworks.com.au

Visual Arts
Music
Drama
Health and Physical Education
PDHPE
History
Geography (coming soon)
Commerce
Business Studies
Science

Literacy consulting and mentoring

If you would like in-person support from a literacy expert, or if you want mentoring to work through the steps in this document, please get in touch with me.

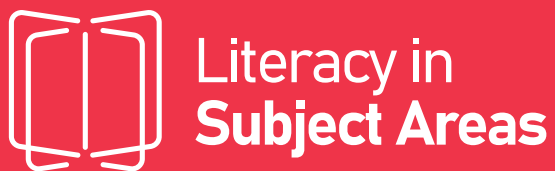
Email trish@literacyworks.com.au

or call 0412198270.

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