

Five Key Recommendations for Improving Academic Literacy in ADOLESCENTS

(grades 4-12, What Works Clearinghouse)

[IES Practice Guide, Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices.](#)

(Kamil, et al., May, 2014)

This practice guide presents five recommendations that are supported by research. The NAEP data discussed in the overview make it clear that many adolescents lack the robust literacy skills they need for success in school and in the workplace. Many of these students can benefit tremendously when their classroom teachers adjust their instruction in ways that this practice guide recommends. The first four recommendations provide evidence-based strategies that can usually be implemented by regular classroom teachers, those who teach content areas to students.

1. Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction and Use of Academic Language

Teachers should provide students with explicit vocabulary instruction both as part of reading and language arts classes and as part of content-area classes such as science and social studies. By giving students explicit instruction in vocabulary, teachers help them learn the meaning of new words and strengthen their independent skills of constructing the meaning of text.

Level of evidence: Strong"

- a. Dedicate a portion of regular classroom lessons to explicit vocabulary instruction.
- b. Provide repeated exposure to new words in multiple contexts, and allow sufficient practice sessions in vocabulary instruction.
- c. Give sufficient opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts through activities such as discussion, writing, and extended reading.
- d. Provide students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners.

2. Provide Direct and Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction

Teachers should provide adolescents with direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies are routines and procedures that readers use to help them make sense of texts. These strategies include, but are not limited to, summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and finding the main idea. Comprehension strategy instruction can also include specific teacher activities that have been demonstrated to improve students' comprehension of texts. Asking students questions and using graphic organizers are examples of such strategies. Direct and explicit teaching involves a teacher modeling and providing explanations of the specific strategies students are learning, giving guided practice and feedback on the use of the strategies, and promoting independent practice to apply the strategies. An important part of comprehension strategy instruction is the active participation of students in the comprehension process. In addition, explicit instruction involves providing a sufficient amount of support, or scaffolding, to students as they learn the strategies to ensure success

Level of evidence: Strong

- a. Select carefully the text to use when beginning to teach a given strategy.
- b. Show students how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts.
- c. Make sure that the text is appropriate for the reading level of students.
- d. Use a direct and explicit instruction lesson plan for teaching students how to use comprehension strategies.
- e. Provide the appropriate amount of guided practice depending on the difficulty level of the strategies that students are learning.
- f. Talk about comprehension strategies while teaching them.

3. Provide Opportunities for Extended Discussion of Text Meaning and Interpretation

Teachers should provide opportunities for students to engage in high-quality discussions of the meaning and interpretation of texts in various content areas as one important way to improve their reading comprehension. These discussions can occur in whole classroom groups or in small student groups under the general guidance of the teacher. Discussions that are particularly effective in promoting students' comprehension of complex text are those that focus on building a deeper understanding of the author's meaning or critically analyzing and perhaps challenging the author's conclusions through reasoning or applying personal experiences and knowledge. In effective discussions students have the opportunity to have sustained exchanges with the teacher or other students, present and defend individual interpretations and points of view, use text content, background knowledge, and reasoning to support interpretations and conclusions, and listen to the points of view and reasoned arguments of others participating in the discussion.

Level of evidence: Moderate

- a. Carefully prepare for the discussion by selecting engaging materials and developing stimulating questions.
- b. Ask follow-up questions that help provide continuity and extend the discussion.
- c. Provide a task or discussion format that students can follow when they discuss text in small groups.
- d. Develop and practice the use of a specific "discussion protocol."

4. Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning

To foster improvement in adolescent literacy, teachers should use strategies to enhance students' motivation to read and engagement in the learning process. Teachers should help students build confidence in their ability to comprehend and learn from content-area texts. They should provide a supportive environment that views mistakes as growth opportunities, encourages self-determination, and provides informational feedback about the usefulness of reading strategies and how the strategies can be modified to fit various tasks. Teachers should also make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.

Level of evidence: Moderate

- a. Establish meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline as well as around the specific learning processes used to access those ideas.
- b. Provide a positive learning environment that promotes student autonomy in learning.
- c. Make literacy experiences more relevant to student interests, everyday life, or important current events.
- d. Build classroom conditions to promote higher reading engagement and conceptual learning through such strategies as goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning.

5. Make available Intensive and Individualized Interventions for Struggling Readers that can be provided by Trained Specialists

Some adolescents need more support to increase literacy skills than regular classroom teachers can provide. Students who are unable to meet grade-level standards in literacy often require supplemental, intensive, and individualized reading intervention to improve their skills. Such interventions are most often provided by reading specialists or teachers who have undergone thorough training to help them understand the program or approach they will use and to deepen their understanding of adolescent struggling readers.

The purpose of intensive interventions is to accelerate literacy development so that students are able to make substantial progress toward accomplishing reading tasks appropriate for their current grade level. Placement in interventions is often a two-step process, beginning with an initial screening assessment to identify those students who need extra help. This step should be followed by assessment with diagnostic tests to provide a profile of literacy strengths and weaknesses.

Because the cause of adolescents' difficulties in reading may differ from student to student, interventions may focus on any of the critical elements of knowledge and skill required for the comprehension of complex texts. These

elements include: fundamental skills such as phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, and other word analysis skills that support word reading accuracy; text reading fluency; strategies for building vocabulary; strategies for understanding and using the specific textual features that distinguish different genres; and self-regulated use of reading comprehension strategies. Determining students' skill levels, helping students learn specific reading strategies, and providing intensive and individualized instruction appear to be especially promising methods for improving the outcomes of struggling readers. For example, students who have difficulty using the skills needed to recognize words need different intervention than do students whose primary deficits are figuring out the meaning of unfamiliar words or comprehension of extended prose.

Level of evidence: Strong

- a. Use reliable screening assessments to identify students with reading difficulties and follow up with formal and informal assessments to pinpoint each student's instructional needs.
- b. Select an intervention that provides an explicit instructional focus to meet each student's identified learning needs.
- c. Provide interventions where intensiveness matches student needs: the greater the instructional need, the more intensive the intervention. Assuming a high level of instructional quality, the intensity of interventions is related most directly to the size of instructional groups and amount of instructional time.