

# ACE

## Planning Guide:

Practices that Support Student Learning

Written for ACE Teachers by M.Ed. Faculty  
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PART 4

Appendices



# Chapter 10

Teaching Language Arts  
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## Introduction

Everyone has a voice. The overall goal of teaching English Language Arts is to give students the skills and tools they need in order to be able to use, refine, and hone their own voices, while also being able to listen and respond to others' voices.

This subject can look very differently at individual schools. Some might have a designated reading teacher and another teacher who focuses on writing, grammar, and vocabulary. In some situations, language and literacy skills might be assessed and taught through the lens of a distinct content area, such as Social Studies or Science. To others, English Language Arts might include all of the subheadings listed under the Common Core standards. Just a glance at these shows one how much depth and breadth this subject spans. Students must be able to read informational text and literature; they must be grounded in foundational reading strategies; students should be able to write and read critically and clearly, as well as demonstrate speaking and listening skills; students also need to be able to use the standard conventions of English in their writing. (Disclaimer: Each school or district may have its own state or Archdiocese standards to which curriculum is aligned, but for the purposes of this chapter, the Common Core Standards will be referenced. This is not to say that one type of standards is better than another, but in this case it is useful as a general reference.)

This is a long list and can be overwhelming to teachers who wonder where to begin. But it's important to remember that the main goal here, as was said earlier, is to give students the tools they need in order to use their voices and to listen to the voices of others. In this way, they can become who they were made to be, to become "men

and women for others” who will contribute to society and change the world (Ignatian Spirituality). A first, important step for a teacher would be to find out what English Language Arts looks like in his/her school. Does it include grammar instruction? Should vocabulary be taught in an integrated way with the literature students read? Figuring this out right away is key.

For many, books were the first worlds explored as a child. The universe opened up on the pages of stories read to us or that we read. And in writing about our world around us -- in diaries, journals, stories, plays, etc. -- we first discovered and understood our world. This awe and wonder should guide instruction as much as possible. When students master close reading strategies or proper paragraph writing, they're not simply memorizing formulaic or rote rules. When they've mastered how to write a complete sentence, they are finally free to communicate their ideas, to make their voices heard, and to be understood.

The Common Core Standards currently reflect the “next generation of K-12 standards designed to prepare all students for success in college, career, and life by the time they graduate from high school.” The trend in these standards is to recognize that reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills can be assessed and taught through various content areas. If students are already reading informational text in a Science class, for example, then the teacher can work on reading comprehension skills and text structures with students. This cross-curricular and integrated approach reflects the modern classroom, as well as the expectations students will be held to in college and in their careers. As explained by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, “Because students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, the standards promote the literacy skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines.” Working with students on these skills in various subjects will reinforce and help develop their reasoning, critical thinking, understanding of complex texts, and use of support and evidence for their arguments.

One other idea to keep in mind is that main concepts and skills for English Language Arts, especially in the middle grades up through high school, remain basically the same, but are adjusted for developmental level. For example, in Grade 5, students should be able to “Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2). By the time they are in Grade 11, this has progressed to ask that students should be able to “Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2). Although the foundational skills persist throughout a child’s education, this consistency is purposeful and allows teachers and students to explore them with greater depth as the child grows older and develops.

Teaching English Language Arts can certainly be daunting, as there is an incredible amount of material to cover. Some teachers may or may not have a school curriculum, and the number of resources available will also differ from school to school. Some suggested resources for getting started with planning and instruction are listed here:

- PBS Learning Media (<https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/ela/>)

This resource comes from the Indiana Public Broadcasting Stations and allows teachers to browse standards or search for lesson plan ideas by subject, grade, and type. It also has tools like a lesson builder, quiz-maker, storyboard, and puzzle maker.

- Accelerated Reader Bookfinder ([www.arbookfind.com/](http://www.arbookfind.com/))

This site allows students and teachers to search for books by authors, topics, or titles of books. Searches provide information about a book’s level, as well as skills that could be assessed in a quiz.

- National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE.org)

This platform features a variety of resources for teachers of English and is also an excellent way to connect with other teachers. Teachers can get a student membership for access to additional articles, online learning tools, and forums to exchange ideas. It categorizes tools by elementary, middle, and high school learners.

- ReadWriteThink via the NCTE (<http://readwritethink.org/>)

ReadWriteThink was created by members of the NCTE and offers lesson plans, printable, interactive tools, and ideas for activities.

- National Writing Project (<https://www.nwp.org/>)

This is a key resource for teaching reading and writing with ideas from teachers across the nation. They also offer programs for professional development in schools.

## ● Key Strategies for English Language Arts

As discussed earlier, the main objective of English Language Arts instruction is to build a student's toolkit so that they can use their own voices and listen to others'. Instructional strategies should take a student-centered approach and emphasize student thinking. In order to prepare students to be critical thinkers, dialogic scholars, and thoughtful analysts, it is key to plan lessons that are dynamic and engaging. During these exercises, answers are not fed to students and teachers do not "dump" information into their brains. Students practice and hone skills of reasoning, questioning, discussing, writing, comprehending, inferring, critiquing, creating, and synthesizing information. Described below are several methods of learner-centered educational strategies for English Language Arts. These can also be easily adapted for developmental level and various content areas. In fact, student understanding is often strengthened by integration with other contents and cross-curricular application.



## Reader's & Writer's Workshop

In an English Language Arts classroom, one of the primary objectives is to develop students as readers and writers. At the elementary level, literacy is often taught in a way that emphasizes essential foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness, reading fluency, phonics, etc. By the time students are in middle or high school, they need to work on different skills as they grow and learn. One way to create a classroom culture of reading and writing is to incorporate the workshop model. There are many different ways to do this, and each teacher might have a personal approach, but the main idea is to model and reinforce the processes that good readers and writers use.

In the reader's workshop, teachers engage the class in reading a text as a whole group, with shared reading, or through guided reading. By doing this, "the teacher is modeling reading fluency, the reading voice of the narrator or character, the amount of time between reading and pausing for text reflection, and states the skill being emphasized for the day" (Mullaney 2004). As the teacher models the reading skill, he or she focuses on helping students build this practice as readers. This might include demonstrating thinking about, responding to, and discussing the text.

A reader's workshop lesson might be structured as follows: teacher leads students through mini-lesson while emphasizing a specific reading skill, students get in pairs or work independently to try out the skill on their own, then students might rotate through centers or work in small groups to continue practicing. Finally, students debrief or discuss the lesson's main skill with facilitation from the teacher.

The writer's workshop will follow a similar pattern and will also begin with reading. The teacher might read aloud or guide students as they read a short story or passage to highlight a writer's skill. After pointing out the skill, such as descriptive language, in the example passage(s), the teacher then models using this skill for students. In *Uncommonly Good Ideas*, Sandra Murphy and Mary Ann Smith offer thoughts on lesson design that emphasizes mentor texts and "try-it-on" writing. The authors explain that, "Mentor texts are ideal for demonstrating new strategies and formats. At their best they serve as models of good writing and offer concrete way into teaching craft" (Murphy, Smith 2015). Similar to the reader's workshop, students then have time to practice independently or think with a partner/small group about the skill they were shown. Using centers, students might practice with several different prompts to engage the skill, or begin working on an assignment with that skill as the focus. The "try-it-on" writing suggested by Murphy and Smith would work here. These are "short practice assignments [that] invite students to try out what they are learning and to share their draft with a peer for targeted feedback" (Murphy, Smith 2015). The workshop model offers time to get peer feedback or to confer with the teacher about revision. The key thing here is that the teacher introduces the skill, demonstrates it, and also emphasizes the stages of the writing process.

Especially for the upper grades, the writer's workshop can be utilized to prioritize the writing process and develop a culture of thoughtful revision. Revision, in fact, may be one of the most difficult aspects of the writing process for many students. In addition to offering numerous strategies for writing prompts, Art Peterson's *The Writer's Workout Book* provides four practical ways to teach revision to students. It breaks down revising for specifics, for consistent tone and details, for direct statements, and for conciseness (Peterson 2006). Giving students areas of focus for revision will help them be more thoughtful and successful than if they are given vague directions to review what they've written and improve it. Teachers can structure a workshop to reflect this attitude in a number of ways. Using

stations, teachers could assign different areas with specific focus areas, as shown in the image below from Shelby Scofield. Students can be working individually or with peers on structuring an essay, workshopping sentences, practicing citations, or any number of skills that have been introduced in class and which the teacher wants students to master. Teachers can also use this time to confer with students one on one or meet with small groups of students who need to work on the same skills.

Using this structure for both reader’s and writer’s workshop helps establish the processes that good readers and writers use and which students can work on in a supportive environment.

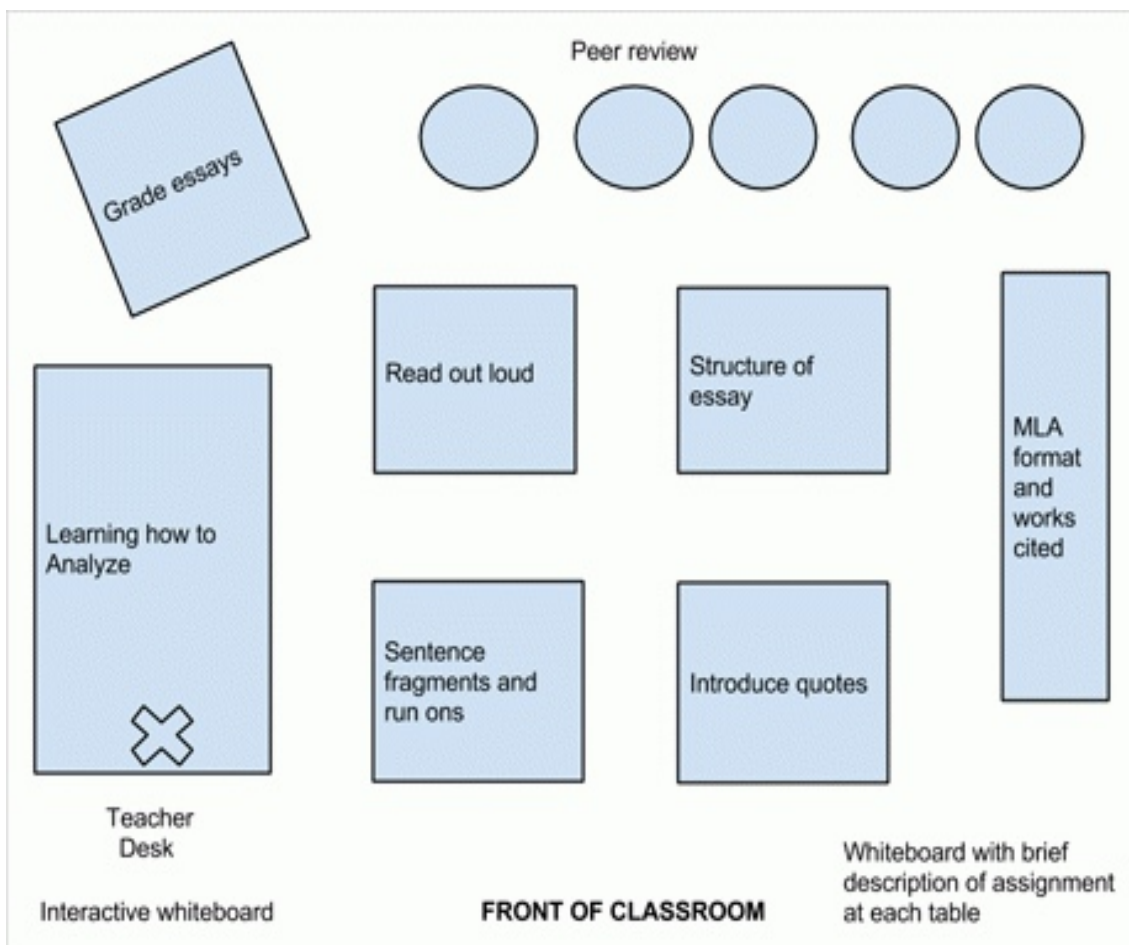


Image credit: Shelby Scofield

## Self-Questioning

An important skill for students to build as readers is a habit of self-questioning in order to lead to deeper thinking, critical understanding, and analysis. Teachers should model this practice for students and scaffold how to do it independently as readers.

Self-questioning is what it sounds like. A reader asks herself questions about the text as she reads. A teacher could model this by reading a text aloud with students and then wondering aloud, modeling taking notes or writing down questions, underlining text, highlighting key information, and recording thoughts in the margins. It can also be helpful -- based on students' developmental levels -- to have a graphic organizer or sentence stems for students to use while they read, especially when this skill is first introduced.

Self-questioning is useful because it helps students master a number of reading and thinking skills, such as summarizing, making predictions and inferences, as well as noting details. Several ways to do this with students are:

- ❑ Have students use Post-it notes to record ideas, questions, and interesting details. Struggling or lower-level reading students could also use Post-its to summarize what's happened in a book every ten pages, etc.
- ❑ Tell students to record notes in a notebook or graphic organizer as they read with one column or section for things they read that practice how to SIT (Summarizing, Interesting, Troubling).
- ❑ Sticky notes could also be used to keep track of new vocabulary. Every time a student encounters a word he does not know, he can

use a sticky to write the definition and place it in the text where he found the word.

- ❑ Students could record notes answering “what comes next?” after each section of a book that could then be shared or discussed with classmates after reading.
- ❑ Students could write questions they have in their reading log.\*

Depending on their level, students will generate different types of questions on their own. Teachers should distinguish between basic types of questions with students, such as literal (found in the text), inferential (deep thinking), and evaluative (taking a position about what was read). A list of sample questions students might ask as they read, depending on level, subject, genre, and purpose are listed below.

- Who’s speaking now?
- What do I think will happen next?
- Does what I am reading make sense?
- What am I supposed to be learning?
- Where am I getting stuck?
- How does this relate to what I already know?
- What am I learning?

Developing these skills will help students become critical thinkers and independent readers. It will also prepare them to contribute to class discussions, share with partners, and respond to text-dependent questions.

## Independent Reading

Reading instruction typically focuses on fluency, comprehension, and analysis. The Common Core Standards require that students “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10). Building time into each day for dedicated independent reading time is crucial to helping students master these skills. Many teachers plan 20-30 minutes of SSR (sustained silent reading) into each day’s instructional time. It’s important that during this time students are reading on-level books that they’ve chosen for themselves. Although students should be assessed for comprehension, there shouldn’t be any other grade attached to this. It’s simply part of creating lifelong readers and a love for literature. This is why students should choose books that they want to read, not that have been assigned or selected by the teacher. Literature circles or novel studies that are done as part of regular instructional units are a more appropriate area in which to work on other reading skills.

Independent reading can easily be assessed with programs like Accelerated Reader. Book level can be found on sites like [arbookfind.com](http://arbookfind.com). Students can search for books from a classroom or school library based on their interests, and then check the book’s level to make sure it is within a student’s current level of ability.

A study by the NCTE in response to the National Reading Panel’s report on independent reading practices found that there are several commonalities between the practices of various highly effective reading teachers. Some of these qualities include “teacher participants supported students’ reading independence; they focused on students’ reading growth; and they were committed to

student-centered practices” (Sanden 2014). Teacher support of student independence was a key finding, emphasizing what was explained earlier in which students should have choice over their reading material, but with teacher guidance as to what is at their reading level. Tools like the Accelerated Reader program, as well as keeping reading logs, help shift the focus to reading growth. This also encourages accountability. Finally, independent reading instruction should be intentional and student-centered. This means that some students might not read silently, as is usually expected, but might need to read orally with a peer, or may need auditory support.

Teachers should have students keep track of their independent reading using a reading log to establish that accountability factor. It’s also important to set up expectations for independent reading in class and what that will look like. Nancy Atwell’s Reading Zone details these expectations, which are adapted below. An example of a reading log is shown below that.

1. Bring your book to class.
2. You must read a book. Magazines and newspapers do not offer the extended chunks of prose you need to develop fluency. More importantly, they won’t let you explore the wide world of reading and discover new genres and interests.
3. Don’t read a book you don’t like. Don’t waste time with a book you don’t love. There are too many great books out there.
4. If you don’t like a book, find another. Ask your classmates, friends, teachers and librarians for suggestions. Browse the bookshelves in the classroom and the library.
5. It’s more than all right to reread a book you love. This is something good readers do.

6. Understand that reading is thinking. Avoid distracting others from the “reading zone.” When you confer with a teacher in the room about your reading, WHISPER.

7. Read the whole time.

8. Read as much as you can. Set a goal for yourself about how much you will read outside of school. A good goal for a middle school reader is a 30 minutes a day.

**Sample reading log\*:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Date	# Pages	What happened?	Book title + author

For additional information about implementing independent reading, check out <https://www.engageny.org/resource/launching-independent-reading-in-grades-6-8-sample-plan>.



## Sustained, Timed Writing

One of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts is that students write over an extended period of time, for a variety of lengths and purposes (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.10). Not only is this important to practice in order to prepare students for standardized tests, where they will most likely be asked to write a piece within a specific time frame, but it also helps build skills of time management, task initiation, and agency. Additionally, practicing this in class and giving students opportunities to research, write, and revise helps build endurance for writing over sustained periods.

In an ELA classroom, this could be implemented in different ways. If a reader's and writer's workshop is already established as described above, a timed approach can be easily adapted from that model. It's a good idea to create lessons at the beginning that incorporate shorter timed sessions. For example, Bellwork might be timed for five minutes at the start of class. Students would be expected to have completed their work and checked it during that time. This slowly sets the expectation that time limits are concrete and should be used to work, as well as revise.

As students build stamina, teachers should include longer timed writing periods. Teachers should demonstrate, model, and discuss with students how to approach a writing prompt during a timed session. One helpful way to talk about this is by using the RAFT method. RAFT stands for Role, Audience, Topic, and Format. Students identify these four categories of the writing prompt first, then plan their writing. This helps to ensure that students are paying attention to the important information given in the prompt and that they can begin to plan for their writing. Any number of graphic

organizers could be useful in helping students pre-write, as discussed in the reader's and writer's workshop. An example of the RAFT writing graphic organizer template from ReadWritethink is shown below.

The image shows a 'RAFT Writing Template' graphic organizer. It features a green header with the title 'RAFT Writing Template' and the 'readwritethink' logo with 'IRA/NCTE' below it. The template is a table with three rows and two columns. The first row has 'Role' in the left column and 'Audience' in the right column. The second row has 'Format' in the left column and 'Topic' in the right column. The third row is a single large cell labeled 'Writing Piece'. At the bottom, there is a copyright notice: '© 2011 IRA/NCTE. All rights reserved. ReadWriteThink.org materials may be reproduced for educational purposes.' and the website 'www.ReadWriteThink.org'.

Role	Audience
Format	Topic
Writing Piece	

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When practicing timed writing in class, it's a good idea to give students options for their writing. This is an easy way to differentiate for student choice/preference. Typically, standardized tests may have several prompts from which students need to choose three out of four to respond to, for example. However, this is not always the case. Either way, practicing this way allows students additional practice selecting a topic. Prompts are also best when they have an essential question for students to consider. Teachers should try to tie these questions to a real-world problem as often as possible. Examples for middle and high school students are in the chart below.

MS	HS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Imagine that you could give advice to someone—it could be someone you know personally, a historical figure, or a famous person living today. Write an essay that identifies the person and the advice you would give. Choose a familiar subject so that you can provide details and elaboration that explain why this person needs your advice. (Expository writing)</li> <li>2. The amount of graffiti has greatly increased at your school. The members of the school board must find ways to stop the graffiti. Write a composition in which you fully explain the solution the school board could use to solve this problem. (Expository writing)</li> <li>3. A role model is a person you look up to. Before you begin writing, think about someone you look up to. Why do you admire this person? Write a composition in which you explain to your classmates whom you admire and why you admire this person. (Expository writing)</li> <li>4. Your principal wants to invite a celebrity speaker to your school. Think about the celebrity you would choose to have speak; then, write a letter to persuade your principal to invite this person. Be sure to include convincing reasons and details to support your choice. (Persuasive writing)</li> <li>5. Suppose Congress wants to make a new national holiday honoring an important person or event. Choose a person or event you would like to honor. Write an essay to convince members of Congress to accept your choice. (Persuasive writing)</li> <li>6. Think of what your school is like at lunchtime. Pick one particular place, and picture it in your mind. This place could be large or small. In a composition, describe clearly to a friend what the place is like at lunchtime so your friend can imagine what it is like to be there. (Descriptive writing)</li> <li>7. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” Write a narrative about a time when you did something you thought you could not do. Be sure to include specific details so that a reader can follow your story. (Narrative writing)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A television network is looking for ideas for a new television series for teenagers. Write a letter to the president of the network explaining your idea for the new television show. Include all the information that will help the president evaluate your idea, including the show’s title, what kind of show it is (such as reality, comedy, music, game, or sports), specific details or features of the show that would be appealing to teenage viewers, and an example of what viewers might see in a typical episode. (Expository writing)</li> <li>2. Your city council is considering a proposal that would ban the use of cellphones in privately owned businesses such as restaurants, movie theaters, and retail stores. Violators would be subject to a fine. What is your position on this issue? Write a letter in which you convince the city council to support your position, giving strong evidence for your reasons. (Persuasive writing)</li> <li>3. Your local school board is considering requiring students to take part in community service programs in order to graduate. What is your position concerning this issue? Write a letter to the members of the school board stating your position and supporting it with convincing reasons. Be sure to explain your reasons in detail. (Persuasive writing)</li> <li>4. Think about an event in your life that taught you an important lesson. Write a narrative in which you tell what happened and how you learned a lesson. Be sure to include specific details so that a reader can follow your story. (Narrative writing)</li> <li>5. “The Story of an Hour” tells a story about a woman who receives some shocking news. Read the story. Then, write an essay discussing Mrs. Mallard’s conflict in the story and how she deals with the conflict. Be sure to include examples and details from the story to support your ideas. Do not merely summarize the story. (Literature prompt)</li> </ol>

## Text-Based Questions

One way to integrate students' reading and writing skills is to use text-dependent questions. Increasingly, students are assessed on their ability to read literary or informational text and support arguments with evidence from the text. Standardized tests might also ask students to read passages for comprehension, and then answer a series of questions that require evaluation and analysis of what was read.

Once teachers have worked on self-questioning and good note-taking with students to get them thinking about what they are reading, they are ready to begin writing about their thinking and communicating their ideas. One way to begin this is to use sentence frames students can use to respond to questions about text. Especially in the lower grades, teachers should emphasize that students should restate the question in their answers and use complete sentences. Practicing this with basic questions at first will help students build this habit. This might look like:

- Who is the principal of our school?
  - The principal of our school is Mr. Hernandez.
- When do we celebrate Christ's birth?
  - We celebrate Christ's birth of Christmas.
- Who is a supporting character in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone?
  - A supporting character in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is Ron Weasley.

Two resources that are useful for finding articles with text-dependent questions are ReadWorks.org and <http://goalbookapp.com>. ReadWorks is a non-profit, free resource that provides K-12 teachers with leveled literary and nonfiction passages that can be grouped by grade, lexile level, text type, topic, and skill/strategy. Each passage also has multiple choice reading comprehension questions, as well as accompanying written response questions. Both types of questions require students to refer to the text in their answers.

Goalbook Pathways is another online resource, offering both a free and paid version, with additional passages and sample assessment questions for students. The passages can be found according to grade level, unit of study, and Common Core standards (to which they are all aligned). Teachers can select questions and standards that are on-level for students developmentally. This exercise in-class helps prepare students for tests, as well as builds skills needed for analytical and argumentative essays.

Achievethecore.org has several useful guides for teachers on how to create text-based questions, and also offers examples. Below are some guidelines they offer for creating questions of depth and complexity:

1. Think about what you think is the most important learning to be drawn from the text. Note this as raw material for the culminating assignment and the focus point for other activities to build toward.
2. Determine the key ideas of the text. Create a series of questions structured to bring the reader to an understanding of these.
3. Locate the most powerful academic words in the text and integrate questions and discussions that explore their role into the set of questions above.
4. Take stock of what standards are being addressed in the series of questions above. Then decide if any other standards are suited to being a focus for this text. If so, form questions that exercise those standards.

5. Consider if there are any other academic words that students would profit from focusing on. Build discussion planning or additional questions to focus attention on them.

6. Find the sections of the text that will present the greatest difficulty and craft questions that support students in mastering these sections. These could be sections with difficult syntax, particularly dense information, and tricky transitions or places that offer a variety of possible inferences.

7. Develop a culminating activity around the idea or learning identified in #1. A good task should reflect mastery of one or more of the standards, involve writing, and be structured to be done by students independently.

Examples of text-dependent questions on an assessment:

MS	HS
(Based on excerpt of 1984 by George Orwell) What is the intended contrast between Winston's viewpoint and that of the reader?	(Based on Langston Hughes' "Thank You, Ma'am") On page 124, the narrator states, "The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived or his folk." What did she do instead? Why?
In paragraph 4, what does the word <u>fitfully</u> most nearly mean?	(Based on "Contents of a Dead Man's Pocket") What is the "sheer emptiness" Tom encounters on page __? How does the use of the words "sheer emptiness" enhance the suspense?
(Based on Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day") On pg. 155, Bradbury provides a vivid description of life on Venus. Describe the setting and how it affects the mood.	(Based on comparison of drafts of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) Lincoln made several small but significant changes to the first draft of the Gettysburg Address. For example, he changed the phrase "those who died here" to read in the final draft as "those who here gave their lives." What is the effect of moving "here" from the end of the phrase to the middle? Of changing "died" to "gave their lives"?

## Activating Prior Knowledge in ELA

Just as in any other content area, activating students' prior knowledge is a crucial part of instruction in English Language Arts. Teachers can pre-assess knowledge on a unit or concept before beginning in order to meet students where they are when planning instruction. This can also be a gauge of what students already know, what they bring to a class, and what interest they have in the concept. This can also be an opportunity to build continuity between units and assist students in making those connections, as well as set them up to make predictions about what will come next.

Many of the skills students are building in each unit naturally build upon one another, so activating prior knowledge helps with recall of previously practiced skills. It can be a simple strategy to engage students and get them interested in the new concepts. Jim Burke discusses the way students learn in his book, *The English Teacher's Companion*, and supports his ideas with information from the National Research Council. There are three discoveries surrounding the learning process that Burke highlights from this study. The first important finding is that "attention to students' thinking and their personal experiences is essential in today's culturally and cognitively diverse classrooms" (Burke 2013). Burke relates this to the classroom culture that teachers establish and he goes on to say that "if their knowledge, experience, culture, and interests have a place in the classroom, students will feel they, too, can find a place within such a class" (Burke 2013). This will lead to more buy-in and engagement in class, he posits. Using what students bring to class, teachers can also improve students' enduring understanding of a topic.

There are numerous methods of activating prior knowledge that most teachers will probably be familiar with, but several that are especially useful to teachers of English Language Arts are the K-W-L method, Bellwork questions, and Chalk Talk. An even more updated and involved version of the traditional KWL comes from an adaptation of John Barell's *Why Are School Buses Always Yellow?* and looks like this:



One other useful way to activate prior knowledge is either to have students do a Turn-and-Talk or a Chalk Talk. Both methods get students "chatting" about what they know or their associations with a topic before a teacher begins instruction. A Turn-and-Talk is what it sounds like: students partner with a shoulder buddy or someone seated near them and discuss what they know, or answer a question posed by the teacher. This could be "what do we know about using evidence when crafting our own argumentative writing?" as an example. The same question could be posed



by a teacher during a Chalk Talk, or she could simply write the words “Evidence in Writing” on the board. Students then silently use chalk (or dry erase markers, etc.) to take turns going up to the board and add to the chalk conversation about what they know. These words, phrases, or ideas then serve as a starting point of discussion for the teacher or even a launch for that lesson’s instruction.

Another method of helping students build from their background knowledge and make connections to new concepts is to have them use brainstorming, concept maps, or graphic organizers to visualize or map out their thinking. This silent, individual work allows students to consider what they already know and how to represent it. A basic brainstorm web could be a good beginning for some students, while others may want to use a flow chart. Still, for some, a supported, scaffolded tool could be better. Venn diagrams or T-charts could be an option for comparing topics, or an outline of main ideas could work well for other concepts. In this case, it can be beneficial to differentiate by offering students a choice in how they represent their thinking instead of requiring all students to use the same tool.

## Questioning & Discussions in ELA

While it is important in the beginning of a unit to build students' declarative and factual knowledge of a subject with lower-level Bloom's level objectives, this mainly focuses on factual recall. For students to build deeper knowledge and use critical thinking, framing questions and discussions with a variety of techniques can help them gain higher-order knowledge and expand their learning.

Todd Finley, of the blog Edutopia, has also adapted the guidelines from the University of Washington's Center for Instructional Development and Research, which recommends "purposeful questions prepared in advance, assessment, and starting points for further conversations." Finley explains that this study from the University of Washington emphasizes that teachers need to "distribute opportunities to talk, allow discussants to physically see each other, ask questions that 'may or may not have a known or even a single correct answer,' foster learners talking to peers, encourage students to justify their responses, [and] vary the types of questions."

Detailed below are some discussion strategies, many of which are described in greater detail in the nearly-comprehensive list from Jennifer Gonzalez of Cult of Pedagogy. These methods incorporate the strategies that Finley and the University of Washington suggest.

First, **Fishbowl** discussions involved two students who sit facing one another, while the other students sit in a circle around them. The students on the outside observe and take notes while the two students in the center have a discussion based on a specific skill or set of questions posed by the teacher. Sometimes, this method also involves students on the outside having a back-and-forth discussion

on paper commenting on what they hear being discussed in the center, or it might also progress with students trading seats, such as trading places with those in the center.

**Four Corners** is another discussion strategy that gets students interacting with one another. Typically, a teacher will make statements, such as “Elizabeth Bennett is a static character in *Pride and Prejudice*.” Students will then move to the four corners of the classroom, each one designated as “Agree,” “Strongly Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree” (or something similar, based on the chosen concept). Once at the spot they’ve chosen to move to, a teacher might have students discuss their reasons for moving there with another student who also chose that corner. This might also then be opened up to the whole class, or students might respond to classmates who moved to a corner different from the one they chose.

**A Gallery Walk** is another strategy teachers could employ to generate discussion. This is a higher-prep activity where a teacher sets up stations with posters, photos, or a prompt for students to respond to. Groups of students travel from station to station at their own pace, or according to a timer, and respond to the station’s prompt. Typically, they might have to answer questions that then result in discussion. Occasionally, teachers might have individual students move around the room from station to station, going in opposite directions so that they encounter a new partner at each station. Again, they would respond to the prompt and discuss together.

**Socratic seminar** is one of the most widely known and used styles of discussion. Students are meant to come to the discussion prepared, having read something for class assigned by the teacher and having answered or thought about questions on the text. The teacher begins by asking an open-ended question to the class, and then students take it from there. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands. They respond respectfully to one another, and might ask questions from a classmate for clarification or follow-up, or to ask someone

to point to evidence in the text to support an answer. It is important with this strategy for the teacher to practice this several times with students before they are ready to have a discussion on their own. Teachers should model good question-asking, think-alouds about the text, and be explicit in expectations for the discussion. It's a good idea to provide students with a rubric, as well, so that they know what they will be expected to do during the course of the discussion. Especially for middle school students, a teacher should probably provide sentence starters or question frames that students can use when discussing. A list of these is given below:

- To clarify:
  - Is it your position that...
  - To be clear, you're saying that...
  - I'm confused when you say X. Can you elaborate?
- To agree:
  - I agree with Y because...
  - Z's point about X was important because...
- To disagree:
  - I see it differently because...
  - The evidence I've seen suggests something different.
- To build on someone's point:
  - Y mentioned that...
  - Yes-and furthermore...
- To summarize:
  - Overall, what I'm trying to say is...
  - My whole point in one sentence is...
  - I think this because...

## Group Work in ELA

Group work that's productive offers an excellent opportunity for students to learn together, as well as offers a low-stakes environment in which students can try out ideas that can later be brought to whole-group discussion. However, group work also has a tendency to become busywork and if groups are not purposeful or expectations are unclear, it could devolve into chaos and distraction where students are off-task and unfocused.

There are several things to keep in mind in order to plan effective group work for English Language Arts. First, it's a good idea to keep students on a timer during group work and to post the time so that all students can see it, either in the form of a countdown digital timer or an easily seen clock. Setting expectations for voice level and individual roles (such as a leader, note-taker, time-keeper, etc.) during the work is also important as a first step. Directions or task lists should be given to students and should also be posted in a visible way. Done well, group work helps students build teamwork skills, as well as interdependence. Several key ways to incorporate group work in English Language Arts class are detailed below.

**Think-Pair-Share:** This strategy can be done as a way to begin a lesson or review material from previous study, homework, or reading. It can also be implemented to introduce new material, similarly to the Turn-and-Talk discussed earlier in the Activating Prior Knowledge section. A teacher might pose a question to the class, or have it written on the board as part of a warm-up or bellwork activity. Students first think on their own about their answer to a question, or

a teacher might have them complete a graphic organizer, jot down notes or thoughts in a journal, or draw a picture to represent their ideas. Once they've had time to think on their own, they then partner with someone -- this could be a shoulder buddy or deskmate -- and share what they think. The partners take turns sharing and discussing their ideas. To hear from partners and ensure that they are being active, attentive listeners, the teacher might call on a partner group and ask a student, "what did your partner say?" or "what did your partner think?" Students work on summarizing the ideas they heard their partner say and think about how this relates to their own ideas.

**Presentations:** Groups can also be utilized as a way to encourage students to work together to determine the key information about a concept and present it to the class. This reaches standards of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. For example, students in a middle school or high school English Language Arts class might work in groups to create character analysis charts when learning about character development in a narrative unit or when doing a character study for a novel. Groups should be assigned individual roles, or be given a list of roles that they choose amongst their group members. Directions should be posted in a visible space for all students and they should be provided with necessary materials, such as poster paper and markers. A rubric for the presentation's focus should also be given to students ahead of time. A presentation could be done in one class period, depending on the length, or could be broken up over a multi-day lesson plan.

**Acting and role-play:** Another method of group collaboration that will get students thinking about what they are learning in class is to have them act it out or take on certain roles. When reading a novel in class, a play, or even within literature circles, students could be given a scene or section from the literature to reenact for their classmates. Teachers might also ask students to imagine a book character in a new setting, from a different perspective, or create a scenario in which students need to predict/show how a character would behave. This requires students to think about what they

know about a character -- either fictional or nonfiction -- and apply that to a new situation. Some examples for middle and high school students are in the chart below:

MS	HS
What happened when Jem, Scout, and Dill went to Boo Radley's in <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> ? Reenact the scene.	What occurs in Act 1, Scene 4 of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> when Romeo attends the masked party?
Retell the key events of the Ceremony of the Twelve from <i>The Giver</i> .	In Chapter 7 of <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , Tom and Gatsby confront one another at the Plaza Hotel. Reimagine this scene in modern day and show what would happen.
Why does Esperanza have to leave her home and go to California in <i>Esperanza Rising</i> ? Act out the important events that led to this.	What sort of job would Holden Caulfield from <i>Catcher in the Rye</i> apply for? Present his interview to the class.

**Literature Circles:** Sometimes in English Language Arts classes, group work might be utilized for longer-term projects. One of the most common methods involves individual work outside of class, as well as group work in class. Often, literature circles are used to group students according to reading level and to differentiate instruction for student readiness. Depending on the skills being assessed, the goal of the unit, or the teacher's objective, literature circles can be used in a variety of ways and for different purposes. Essentially, students read a novel or work of nonfiction over an extended period of time along with several other classmates who have a similar reading level. The teacher will create sections of the book that students need to read and give them a timeline of when the sections need to be completed. For example, one higher-level group might be reading a book with 300 pages and 15 chapters while another group is reading a 200-page book with 20 short chapters. In order to keep groups on the same pace even though they have different books, section one for the first

group might be Chapters 1-3 and the second group's first section could be pages 1-35. For each section, students usually complete questions about their book that they need to prepare for their literature circle discussion.

When they are ready to discuss the section of the book with their literature circle groups, students are usually assigned specific roles that rotate for each section they complete. Four common group roles are: 1) the scribe who takes notes on the group's discussion, 2) the mediator/leader who facilitates and guides discussion, 3) the publisher who presents the group's findings to the class, or to the teacher in some way, and 4) the time-keeper who keeps the group on task. Students work in these groups until the book is completed, and may or may not have an additional project or presentation to work on together as a culminating part of their unit.



## Assessing Instruction in ELA

Working with students to achieve mastery of the standards in English Language Arts, similarly to other content areas, involves assessment that uses both selection format and open-response questions so that students are showing a range of thinking to the teacher. Selection format questions, such as multiple choice and true/false, will provide more objective answers, while open-response questions tend to be more subjective. A mix of factual-based, selection questions and extended written response questions would show a clearer, fuller picture of a student's understanding. Relying too much on either type, or skewing a test toward one category of questions would not be the best measure of student knowledge.

Teachers should ask themselves at the beginning of a unit, "what do I want students to know?" and "what do I want students to be able to do?" These two questions should guide instruction, as well as assessment. Teachers know, too, that a unit's goal should be aligned with the final assessment. So, once students have answered for themselves what students should know and be able to do, they will more readily be prepared to create an assessment that reflects what students should have learned in a unit.

A helpful way to think about this is to approach it from the student perspective. If teachers plan to give students a study guide for the unit test or a rubric for the performance assessment, it's useful to consider what students should practice in order to be prepared for the assessment. This answers that question of what they should be able to do. When making the study guide or reviewing information for a test with students, a teacher should begin with the verbs or the skills that students should practice and be able to demonstrate for

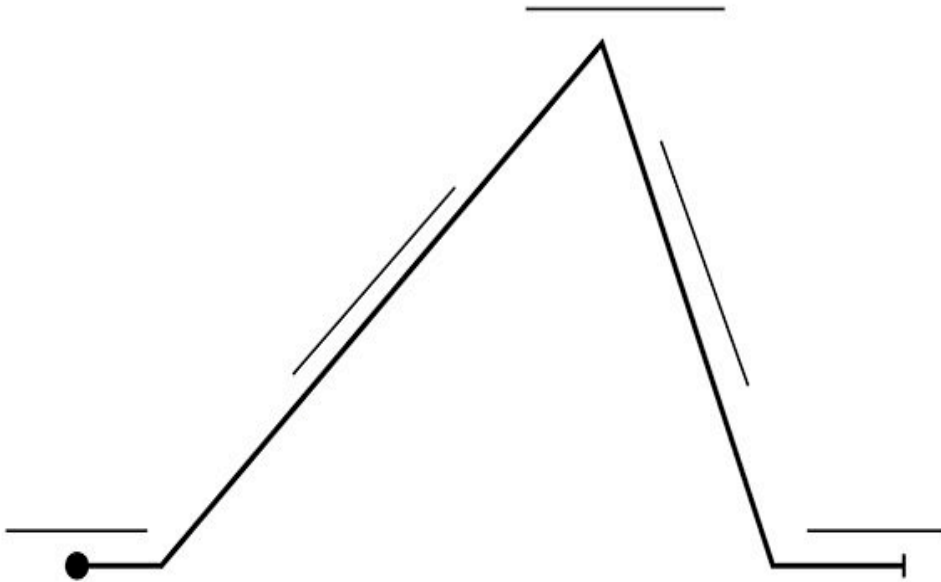
the test. For example: Draw evidence from multiple texts to support an argument; identify a central idea from a passage; give examples of figurative language. Many of these can be naturally drawn from the unit's lesson objectives, which should also be designed to build toward the unit goal.

For an English Language Arts assessment, many of the questions should be based on reading excerpts, especially for a literature-focused or reading skills test. An assessment might have several questions about one passage, for example, focused on vocabulary usage, mood, tone, theme, or main idea. As mentioned earlier, these assessments should have a mix of selection format questions in the form of matching, fill in the blank, true/false, and multiple choice questions. Another portion of the test should include written response questions that can be answered in an essay or short answer that require higher-order thinking such as analysis, interpretation, synthesis, and making evidence-based assertions. Although these skills might have been practiced during the unit, any of the work on the test should be previously unseen for students, of course.

Teachers should strive for a balance of questions and should also aim to make assessments dynamic in order to extend learning. For written performance assessments, such as an essay, teachers should incorporate revision, conferring with students about areas to improve and providing feedback for continued growth. For traditional tests, teachers could also give students the test again to work on in partners or as a small group the day after the test. They wouldn't get to change their original answers or grade, but it would offer another opportunity to view and discuss the questions and learn from what other classmates did. This way, it avoids the tendency that students might have to cram for a test, take it, receive a grade, forget about it, and throw it away.

Sample selection format test questions follow:

## Plot Diagram



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MS	HS
<p>1. Label the plot diagram with the correct terms.</p> <p>(This question asks for factual recall to assess if students can identify the parts of plot).</p> <p>2. What type of conflict does a person have within themselves?</p> <p>A. <b>internal</b>            B. external</p> <p>(This question requires students to recall the definition of these terms and to be able to distinguish between them).</p>	<p>1. <b>**How are the details about Mie’s interest in the red cranes important to the development of a central theme in the passage?</b></p> <p>A. They suggest that Mie will not listen to her parents’ advice because she has a strong personality</p> <p><b>B. They reinforce the idea that that Mie remains idealistic despite her mother’s cautious realism.</b></p> <p>C. They highlight the dangers of Mie’s unrealistic expectations about her future.</p> <p>D. They emphasize the importance of Mie’s decision to follow a cultural tradition.</p> <p>(**Students would first read “Red Cranes” by Jacey Choy. This question assesses whether students can use textual details and apply this to theme, accessing that factual/procedural knowledge. It comes from a practice test for the ELA/Literacy PARCC assessment).</p> <p>2. Which of the following statements is true?</p> <p>A. Ismene decides not to help Antigone bury her brother because she believes that her brother has become a traitor to the city.</p> <p>B. Ismene decides to help Antigone bury her brother so that they may move on with their life and commit to being more responsible members of the city.</p> <p><b>C. Ismene decides not to help Antigone bury her brother because she believes that her duty as a woman is to obey the laws of the city.</b></p> <p>D. Ismene decides to help Antigone bury her brother because she believes her brother has sacrificed his life for the betterment of the city.</p> <p>(This question assesses factual information from the text Antigone. It is used with permission from its creator, Lauren Kloser, ACE 14).</p>

Sample open response test questions are below:

MS	HS
<p>1. The following is an excerpt from the novel <i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson. In a paragraph, predict what will happen next based on the author's tone and imagery. Use details from the excerpt to support your answer.</p> <p>(This question asks students not only to notice but to provide details in the text and using evidence. It asks students to move beyond the inferences asked for in the questions from the other example and expects analysis of the tone and imagery).</p> <p>2. Using the passage given, develop your own blackout poem and explain in a paragraph how you did this.</p> <p>(This question requires that students have background knowledge of what a blackout poem is and how to make one; it then asks students to create an original work and describe their process of doing so).</p>	<p>3. Annotate the poem, then construct a written response with a thesis that pulls ideas from throughout the poem. Taking the most important ideas from your annotation, construct a thesis that analyzes the thematic meaning of the poem and its place in the Modernist school of thought.</p> <p>(This question asks students to analyze the poem and synthesize their ideas about its theme. Whereas before with the objective questions, students used details to find theme, here they must find details on their own as well as analyze them for theme. It is used with permission from its creator, Lauren Kloser, ACE 14).</p> <p>4. Odysseus has many epithets: "the godlike survivor," "Zeus-born," "a real iron-man," "master of wiles" and "conqueror of Troy." Telemachus is known as a "sweet light" who has a "clear-headed way" and is "wise beyond his years." Explain how these epithets provide an insight into their character and what we learn about the difference between the two men.</p> <p>(This question requires character analysis, moving students beyond inferring characterization to comparison. It is used with permission from its creator, Lauren Kloser, ACE 14).</p>

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, it was suggested that teachers find out from their schools what English Language Arts means or looks like at the school, as it can mean many different things. Most of the strategies outlined in this chapter apply directly to reading and writing instruction. However, if given the opportunity or expectation to teach grammar and vocabulary, below is a short list of strategies teachers might consider using in their instruction.

### **Grammar**

- Highlight key skills in conjunction with writing instruction (i.e. declarative sentences when differentiating between facts and opinions or in an argumentative writing unit)
- Go over expectations for written work and what conventions students should follow; then, be consistent with editing/grading that looks for these conventions (such as starting all sentences with a capital letter, making sure punctuation is correct, and that sentences are complete).
- Give students a handout or bookmark to keep with them that has editing and proofreading marks that they are expected to understand and use.
- Avoid teaching grammar skills in isolation or having students fill out worksheets that practice rote skills. This may be used as a supplement for additional practice with a tricky concept, but should not be the primary way grammar is taught.

- One tool that might be useful in developing an approach to grammar that does not isolate skills, but integrates the instruction and offers opportunities for students practice often is Daily Grammar Practice. This format has students work with one sentence per week and breaks down different components of grammar day by day.

## **Vocabulary**

- One way to approach teaching vocabulary is to integrate it with the literature that students are reading. A teacher might prepare a list of vocabulary words for each chapter or section in a book students are reading, or highlight new vocabulary from short stories or articles read in class and create a list of them that students will be expected to know. Teachers can then use strategies to review and learn these words with students, such as having them use the word in sentences, complete Frayer models, write a story with the words, draw pictures to show their meaning, or create a crossword puzzle with the words. Review can be done with dry erase boards in class, or any number of ways, before students are quizzed on the words.
- Teachers might have a vocabulary book they are meant to teach where students may or may not have a corresponding workbook. In this style, teachers might use one or two-week periods for students to learn the words from the book's units, using some of the strategies mentioned above. With this method, it's important to continue to revisit words from previous lists or to have a cumulative test so that students do not simply memorize the words temporarily and then forget about them.
- Another approach to vocabulary involves using Greek and Latin roots of words to teach about suffixes, prefixes, etc. This helps students build awareness of how deductive reasoning can help them figure out a meaning of a word they haven't previously encountered.

Overall, students and teachers should use what resources are available. Students should be exposed to as large a variety of literature as possible, including in genre, culture, author, time period, and style. They should also write in as many styles, genre, and formats as possible. In middle and high school, students are developing their voices as writers and becoming stronger, more aware readers. When planning in this content area, teachers may use a range of passages, short stories, novels, nonfiction articles, short stories, media, and other literacies to introduce skills and instruct students. Giving students access to diverse and rich literature, teachers should aim to help them develop key skills, aligned with the Common Core standards for reading and writing, as well as speaking and listening. Teachers should lead students to high levels of critical thinking, analysis, inquiry, interpretation, evaluation, creation, and synthesis. Applying the skills they've practiced in class with teacher guidance, students will be prepared for academic and non-academic success.

It's also important to cultivate the love of reading and writing by engaging students where they are. This involves planning instruction to respond to students' experiences and context. Teachers should look for opportunities to include real-world, relevant, current issues to incorporate in class. Using events and issues from the community is also one way to be responsive to students. planning field trips or collaborative partnerships with local institutions, libraries, museums, or other schools may also be an engaging way to broaden students' perspectives and resources. It's helpful to show students, too, how the skills they learn in English Language Arts are not just applied on tests in schools, but in their own lives now and in the future.



## Questions

1. How can teachers structure their allotted class time to incorporate instruction for all areas of the English Language Arts? Use the chart below for ideas and consider how you might adapt this for your own class and school schedule. (Keep in mind that students will also probably need a “brain break” at some point in the lesson).

90 minute blocks	50 minute blocks	Your allotted time
<p><b>MS:</b>            20 minutes SSR            5 minute bellwork            10-15 minute mini-lesson to introduce skill            10-15 minute reading with focus on skill            20 minute class activity (individual practice or group work)            10-15 minute reflection and transition to writing skill            15 minute writing practice or workshop time            5 minute closing procedures            *Note: teachers can alternate writing or reading first depending on the unit and the day to give equal time to both areas of the subject</p>	<p><b>MS:</b>            5 minute bellwork            5 minute vocabulary review or grammar practice            10 minutes direct instruction            15 minutes partner work, group work, or individual practice            10 minutes whole group            5 minute exit ticket, homework, exit procedures</p>	<p><b>MS:</b></p>
<p><b>HS:</b>            20 minutes SSR            5 minute bellwork            10 minute review homework or previous lesson            20 minutes direct instruction or mini-lesson with literature (could either be focused on a reading skill or writing skill)            20 minutes individual practice or group work            10 minutes whole class review            5 minutes closing procedures</p>	<p><b>HS:</b>            5 minute bellwork            15 minute mini-lesson or direct instruction            15 minute exploration in groups or individually            10 minute summary and whole class reflection            5 minute closing procedures</p>	<p><b>HS:</b></p>

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