

THE CONVERSATION

Explainer: how is literacy taught in schools?

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When children start school, they need to develop reading fluency. from www.shutterstock.com

When education commentators turn their attention to the teaching of reading in Australian schools, they often use metaphors of war. They talk about the **reading wars** as if our classrooms are sites of intense battle.

This can lead to parents becoming not only confused, but deeply worried about the teaching of reading, and whether their children are being used as cannon fodder in a fight between two opposing sides.

The reality of teaching and classrooms across Australia is far from this image of battle zones, bullets and wars.

Government and professional associations are making concerted efforts, at the national and state levels, to ensure our school students receive the best possible reading instruction.

For example, the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) recently released a declaration called *Literacy in 21st century Australia*. This draws together the best literacy practices for the classroom and beyond. It explains how literacy goes well beyond traditional notions of reading and writing, with "making meaning" at the heart of all literate practices.

In the Australian curriculum, literacy is not only part of the English curriculum, but is also one of the **general capabilities**. This means that children throughout all years of schooling should be learning how to use language and how to make meaning, not only in English classes, but in other subject areas too.

Literacy is **embedded** across all areas of the curriculum, encompassing:

the knowledge and skills students need to access, understand, analyse and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others and participate in activities at school and in their lives beyond school.

However, there is a lot of **misinformation** in the media about what teachers do, so we thought it would be worth explaining how literacy is taught in Australian classrooms.

The early years, age 5-8: learning to read and write

When children first arrive at school, the focus is on teaching them the "how" of reading and writing.

The Australian curriculum **emphasises** that children need to make connections between their oral language and the written language they are learning.

Students in the foundation year of school need to learn how to understand and recognise the sounds of words, as well as the **connections** between spoken and written words.

They also need to develop reading **fluency**, being able to read without stumbling, to recognise and use a **variety of words**, and to understand what they read.

In years one and two, the focus becomes one of developing text composition and comprehension strategies, including the generic structures and language features of different texts.

Developing vocabulary knowledge is emphasised, as well as reading fluency and comprehension in highly structured daily literacy blocks.

Students engage with high-quality literature and have opportunities to create and explore various ways of expressing themselves through written, visual, spoken and multimodal texts.

Later years, age 8-18: reading and writing to learn

As they move through primary school, students engage in literacy practices across all areas of the curriculum. **Modelled, shared, guided and independent reading and writing** are daily practices.

Students work with the teacher, other students and independently on viewing and designing many different types of texts throughout the school week.

As students enter the high school years, the emphasis shifts to subject-specific literacies. A good overview of some of these can be found on the [curriculum site](#).

All teachers share the responsibility for developing their students' literacy capabilities, regardless of whether they are teaching Year 7 drama or Year 12 physics.

Why teaching literacy is important

There is no doubt that Australia is a literacy-dependent society. The demand on young people is growing within the context of international test rankings and competition, an increasingly globalised workforce and a transitioning economy that requires highly sophisticated literacy skills.

As such, it is important that literacy teaching in classrooms reflects the very best approaches that research, policy and curriculum design can provide.

A review of literacy research found that contemporary literacy practices include:

cracking the relationship between written and spoken language

drawing on cultural knowledge to make meaning from texts

being able to use texts purposefully in different contexts

understanding how texts can present different representations of the world.

The ALEA literacy declaration is clear that:

No one method of reading/writing instruction will ever meet the needs of all children at all times. Therefore educators need to be discerning practitioners as they draw on research that is contemporary, valid and rigorously conducted to inform their practice.

A range of literacy learning support materials is available to teachers and parents, including from education authorities in [New South Wales](#), [Queensland](#) and [Victoria](#). These resources make important links between research, policy and classroom practice.

Professional associations play an important role, including ALEA, the [Primary English Teaching Association of Australia](#) and the [Australian Association for the Teaching of English](#). These organisations provide professional development and resources for teachers, as well as commissioning research projects and undertaking advocacy and public engagement.



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