

The Content Literacy Continuum: Promoting Literacy in Secondary Schools*

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Level 1: Content Mastery

What students do: All students learn *critical* content required in the core curriculum regardless of literacy levels.

What teachers do: Teachers compensate for limited levels of student literacy by leveraging the principles of universal design to use explicit teaching routines; these routines help compensate for a lack of efficient and effective learning strategies to ensure mastery of *critical core content* for all students. Teachers ensure that all students acquire the vocabulary and background knowledge required for basic literacy associated with comprehension and communication through class-wide accommodations, individual accommodations, or technology. In addition, this instruction also responds to complex content literacy demands that require strategic manipulation and use of content information such as categorizing, developing analogies, comparing, questioning or evaluating.

What it looks like: The history teacher introduces a unit on “Causes of the Civil War” by co-constructing with students a Unit Organizer, a graphic organizer used to depict the critical content demands of the unit. The organizer is used throughout the unit to link student prior knowledge to the new unit and to prompt basic learning strategies such as paraphrasing and self-questioning. Other routines are used to ensure that critical vocabulary and background knowledge are developed. For example, the Concept Mastery Routine is used to help students explore an important concept such as “sectionalism.” Other routines provide the foundations for students to learn how to respond to more complex content literacy demands that often require inquiry into critical questions and construction of explanations.

Professional competence: Teachers responsible for ensuring content mastery must *select the critical content*, learn how to enhance that content for mastery, and then implement these enhancements through the use of explicit and sustained teaching routines. Special service providers must help core curriculum teachers provide this type of instruction. This facilitates a mindset in which instruction is delivered in ways that students acquire content information as well as active approaches to learning and responding.

Level 2: Embedded Strategy Instruction

What students do: Students are introduced to and learn to use a set of powerful learning strategies for increasing literacy across their core curriculum classes and apply them to learn the *critical content*.

What teachers do: Teachers directly teach and then embed the use of selected learning strategies that match the specific demands required to learn *critical content* in core curriculum courses. Teachers use direct explanation, modeling, and group practice to teach the strategy and then prompt student application and practice in content-area assignments throughout the school year. For students receiving more intensive strategy instruction (Level 3), teachers assist them in generalizing the use of strategies to core curriculum courses.

What it looks like: For example, at the beginning of the year, the history teacher explains that being able to paraphrase the history text is important because paraphrasing is required to write reports, answer questions, and discuss ideas. The teacher shares the steps of *The Paraphrasing Strategy* (e.g., RAP) with students and models how to paraphrase history text to complete different types of learning tasks. Class activities and assignments are designed to require students to paraphrase text and use information. Both oral and written information is paraphrased. Paraphrased responses may take an oral or written format. Graphic organizers (e.g., The Unit Organizer) that have been introduced as part of Level 1 (see above) are used to model and prompt paraphrasing of critical chunks of content. The teacher continually evaluates and provides feedback to encourage high quality paraphrasing throughout the year. The teacher explains that all teachers in the school will be using, modeling, and prompting RAP.

Professional competence: Teachers adopt a mindset that it is important to embed strategies in content-area instruction. Content teachers learn a shortened form of selected learning strategies (e.g., *Paraphrasing, Self-Questioning*, etc.) that they can use to provide class-wide instruction. Teachers assist in the generalization of strategies that students learn in more intensive instructional settings. In addition, teachers adopt a mindset in which they are aware of strategies that may *emerge* from Level 1 instructional routines; these emerging strategies may guide students in strategic approaches to content literacy demands such as making comparisons, categorizing, or questioning.

Level 3: Explicit Strategy Instruction Options

What students do: Students who have difficulty mastering the strategies presented across the courses offered by core curriculum teachers receive more support to learn them through specialized, more direct, more intense instruction delivered by support personnel.

What teachers do: Special education teachers and support personnel provide more intensive instruction via supplemental instructional sessions delivered in the general education classroom, in a pullout program, through the offering of a separate course, or through beyond-school programs.

What it looks like: For example, the history teacher notices that some students in the class are struggling with paraphrasing. Support personnel develop a plan to reintroduce the steps of *The Paraphrasing Strategy* (RAP) to this group of students. The special education teacher provides additional models and practice in paraphrasing text. The support personnel may guide the student through paraphrasing paragraph-by-paragraph, gradually encouraging students to paraphrase more independently. Explicit feedback and additional practice are provided. Support personnel may work daily for 15-20 minutes a day for three or four weeks until the student gains confidence and masters applying the strategy. As the strategy is learned, the student sees the strategy being required in his history class and other classes and gets the message that this is a valued skill that is worth learning.

Professional competence: Special education and other support personnel learn how to provide intensive and explicit instruction, practice, and feedback in specific learning strategies and the process of strategic tutoring that shows students how to apply strategies as they complete assignments.

Level 4: Intensive Skill Development Courses

What students do: Students develop the foundational decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills through specialized, direct, and intensive instruction in reading. Intensive instruction in listening, speaking, and writing is often a part of these services.

What teachers do: Special education teachers, reading specialists, and speech-language pathologists team to develop intensive and coordinated instructional experiences designed to address severe literacy deficits. Special education teachers and reading specialists will most likely deliver these services. They also assist content teachers in making appropriate modifications in content instruction to accommodate severe literacy deficits.

What it looks like: For example, some students appear to have significant difficulty comprehending because they do not have sufficient decoding skills or they have language problems. Sometimes, these problems are identified before strategy instruction begins and sometimes the problems emerge during strategy instruction. The staff as a team develop options for courses and support services that directly address deficits that cannot be addressed through less intensive efforts. However, the students can still participate in the history class because the teacher is presenting content in ways that take into consideration poor reading strategies. Intensive research-based programs such as *The Corrective Reading Program* are typically chosen as the curriculum to develop these types of services.

Professional competence: Special education teachers and reading specialists learn research-based approaches to implementing programs that develop foundational literacy skills and strategies to students with disabilities

Level 5: Intensive Clinical Intervention Options

What students do: Students with underlying language disorders learn the linguistic, related cognitive, metalinguistic, and metacognitive underpinnings they need to acquire content literacy skills and strategies.

What teachers do: Speech-language pathologists deliver curriculum-relevant language therapy in collaboration with special education and other support personnel who are teaching literacy. Speech-language pathologists collaborate with special education teachers to assist content teachers in making appropriate modifications in content instruction to accommodate language disorders. Speech-language pathologists work with special education teachers to assist students with language disorders to acquire learning strategies.

What it looks like: For example, students identified as language impaired may have difficulty learning *The Paraphrasing Strategy* even when it is taught by learning strategists in a language-sensitive fashion. They may need clinical intervention delivered by individuals who can address the linguistic and metalinguistic underpinnings of the *Paraphrasing Strategy* (RAP) and the academic content.

Professional competence: Speech-language pathologists learn curriculum-relevant approaches to language therapy that interface with other intensive intervention provided to students. Speech-language pathologist and special education teachers learn to collaborate to provide coordinated and integrated services.

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