

WHAT IS LITERACY?

Fact sheet 1/2020



Peter Underwood
Centre

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WHAT IS LITERACY?

Everyone needs literacy. It is essential not only for school-based learning, but also for supporting a successful life outside of school^{5,7}.

What it means to 'be literate' has changed dramatically over the past few decades^{4,7}. Being literate in the 21st century involves a broader range of knowledge, skills, processes and behaviours than ever before, due to factors such as globalisation, technological innovation, and social change. There is widespread recognition that literacy:



Involves both composing texts (speaking, writing, creating) and comprehending texts (listening, reading, viewing)²¹



Involves multiple 'modes' or systems of meaning-making ('multiliteracies'), including spoken language, written language, visual (still and moving images), audio, gestural and spatial modes^{2,3}



Requires critical reflection on how different modes of texts have been constructed to influence people's attitudes and behaviours, and whether these texts can be trusted¹



Is shaped by social and cultural practices in different communities and contexts⁴



Is rapidly changing from print-based modes to digital forms⁶



Varies across different subject areas within the school curriculum²¹

Official Definitions

ACARA = The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority. It developed and supports the national school curriculum that is used in all schools across Australia.

ALEA = The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA). It is an independent professional association dedicated to literacy and English language learning from early childhood through all stages of schooling.




ACARA Australian Curriculum	ALEA Declaration: Literacy in the 21 st Century
Literacy encompasses 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 ²¹ .	Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written (and visual) materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential and to participate fully in the wider society ²⁰ .

THE TASMANIAN CONTEXT

All governments across Australia are keen to improve literacy learning. The Tasmanian Government is implementing initiatives to support staff and students to lift literacy levels. The Department of Education has developed a suite of materials²²:

- *The 2019-2022 Literacy Framework*
- *The Literacy Plan for Action 2019-2022*
- *The Literacy Implementation Plan 2019-2022.*

The Framework and the Plans apply to the whole Department, including schools, Child and Family Centres and libraries. Building on what is currently working, the Action Plan explores what needs to be done differently to achieve system-wide improvement in literacy outcomes.

System Priorities	Key Actions
 <p>Attention to the importance of oral, augmentative, and alternative communication for literacy learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a public campaign to promote the importance of oral language • Build on the collaborative culture between speech and language pathologists and educators for a more coherent approach to improve oral, augmentative and alternative communication • Increase access and support for learners to improve oral, augmentative and alternative communication
 <p>Consistent and aligned practices that are informed by evidence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide system-wide guidance for literacy learning through the effective teaching of English for literacy learning across the curriculum • Provide evidence-based and endorsed resources to support effective teaching of English for literacy learning across the curriculum • Provide quality and targeted professional learning to build the capacity of educators to improve their teaching of English for literacy learning
 <p>Valid and reliable measures of impact and student growth</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop clear expectations and guidelines to build system-wide understanding of the measurement of learner growth in literacy • Implement the tools and supports for effective measurement of learner growth in literacy

The *Literacy Plan for Action 2019-2022* is guided by the 2018–2021 Department of Education Strategic Plan¹⁴ which identifies improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy as one of its four overarching goals.

The Plan is also informed by the *Melbourne Declaration* (updated in December 2019 to the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*¹¹), *Tasmania's Strategy for Children – Pregnancy to Eight 2018-2021*¹⁵ and *26TEN Tasmania: Tasmania's Strategy for Adult Literacy and Numeracy 2016-2025*⁸.

STANDARDISED TESTING

Teachers use many different assessments to know how well students are learning literacy and what they need help with. However, in the media most attention is paid to how different schools, states and countries perform on standardised tests. In relation to literacy, there are three key standardised tests:

PISA²⁵ The *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA) is conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of which Australia is part. It was first conducted in 2000 and compares educational attainment across the world, by assessing how 15-year-olds apply their knowledge and skills in reading, maths and science to real-life problems. Each three-year cycle has a different focus. In 2018 the focus was reading.

PIRLS²⁶ *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) is conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). It was first conducted in 2001, but Australia has only been participating since 2011. PIRLS occurs on a five-year cycle. It assesses Year 4 students on three aspects of reading: purposes of reading; processes for comprehension; reading behaviours and attitudes.

NAPLAN²⁷ The *National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) is administered by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA). It was introduced in 2008 and tests almost all students at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. NAPLAN has three benefits compared to PISA and PIRLS:

- it assesses not only reading, but also writing, spelling and grammar, and punctuation;
- it aligns with the Australian Curriculum; and
- it tests the whole cohort in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, instead of only a sample.

ADVANTAGES OF STANDARDISED TESTS

- ✓ An objective way to measure learning achievements;
- ✓ Can help to pinpoint areas of the curriculum in which students need support;
- ✓ Can help schools to evaluate progress and notice trends compared to other schools;
- ✓ Can help education systems / governments to direct resources to where they are most needed.

DISADVANTAGES OF STANDARDISED TESTS

- ✗ Do not give a full picture of a student's *ability* because they only test some aspects of literacy;
- ✗ Do not give a full picture of a student's *progress* because there often is a long time between each test;
- ✗ Can have a negative impact on a student's confidence;
- ✗ Can put pressure on teachers to 'teach to the test'.

- ➔ Standardised tests are useful, but there is more to learning literacy than is shown in these tests.
- ➔ We all use words and images to communicate with each other every day. This means everyone can help children and young people to improve their literacy.
- ➔ Parents/carers are their children's first and foremost teachers. They can support their children's learning, including for literacy, both at home and at school.
- ➔ For ideas and practical tips on how to help children and young people at different year levels to develop their literacy skills, see our series of **literacy fact sheets** under 'Our Publications, Reports and Resources' on the Peter Underwood Centre website: <https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre>

REFERENCES AND USEFUL LINKS

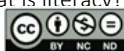
- ¹ Anstey, M. (2002). *Literate Futures: Reading*. Coorparoo, Australia: State of Queensland Department of Education.
- ² Anstey, M., & Bull, G. (2006). *Teaching and Learning Multiliteracies: Changing Times, Changing Literacies*. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association.
- ³ Cope, W., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). Multiliteracies: the beginnings of an idea. In W. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (pp. 3-8). London and New York: Routledge.
- ⁴ Frankel, K. K., Becker, B. L. C., Rowe, M. W., & Pearson, P. D. (2016). From "what is reading?" to what is literacy? *Journal of Education*, 196(3), 7-17.
- ⁵ Rowe, K. (2005) *Teaching Reading Literature Review: A review of the evidence-based research literature on approaches to the teaching of literacy, particularly those that are effective in assisting students with reading difficulties. A report of the Committee for the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy*. Retrieved from Canberra: https://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/5/
- ⁶ Rowsell, J., & Walsh, M. (2011). Rethinking literacy education in new times: Multimodality, multiliteracies, & new literacies. *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 21(1).
- ⁷ Trilling, B., & Fadel, C. (2012). *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in our Times*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

Links:

- ⁸ <https://26ten.tas.gov.au/Pages/Strategy.aspx>
- ⁹ <https://b4.education.tas.gov.au/resources/the-b4-early-years-toolkit/>
- ¹⁰ <https://boston.thebasics.org/>
- ¹¹ <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>
- ¹² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/school-themes/literacy/>
- ¹³ <https://improvingliteracy.org/>
- ¹⁴ <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/DoE-Strategic-Plan-2018-2021.pdf>
- ¹⁵ <https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Tasmania-Strategy-for-Children-Pregnancy-to-Eight-Years-2018-2021.pdf>
- ¹⁶ <https://theconversation.com/ereaders-arent-destroying-reading-theyre-just-changing-it-34664>
- ¹⁷ <https://theconversation.com/how-to-encourage-literacy-in-young-children-and-beyond-80459>
- ¹⁸ <https://theconversation.com/how-to-get-teenagers-to-read-42757>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.adlit.org/article/23399/>
- ²⁰ <https://www.alea.edu.au/aboutus/alea-literacy-declaration>
- ²¹ <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/literacy/>
- ²² <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/about-us/projects/literacy-framework-plan-action/>
- ²³ <https://www.kingborough.tas.gov.au/event/the-basics-channel-launch/>
- ²⁴ <http://www.wordsforlife.org.uk/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.education.gov.au/programme-international-student-assessment-pisa>
- ²⁶ <https://www.education.gov.au/national-assessment-program-progress-international-reading-literacy-study>
- ²⁷ <https://www.education.gov.au/national-assessment-program-literacy-and-numeracy>

This is fact sheet #1 (out of 11), produced as part of the
"Review of Literacy Teaching, Training, and Practice in Government Schools"
and is intended to align with the Department of Education Literacy Plan for Action 2019-2022.
<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/Documents/Literacy-Plan-for-Action-2019-2022.pdf>
For information about the review, other fact sheets and five detailed reports, see:
<https://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/research/completed-projects>

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Launched in 2015, the Peter Underwood Centre is a partnership between the University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Government in association with the Office of the Governor of Tasmania.

