

# Literacy activities

- [1. What Are Literacy Activities?](#)
- [2. Literacy Activities as Precursors to Reading and Writing](#)
- [3. Literacy Activities that Strengthen Acquired Literacy](#)
- [4. Encouraging Children to Read Stories or Tell Stories](#)

In a nutshell

- Literacy activities are a range of different activities that lay a foundation for learners to acquire literacy and concretise the acquired skills.
- Literacy activities are embedded in everyday activities and enhance literacy development.
- These activities start very early in life and include play, singing, storytelling, phonological and phonemic awareness, oral language, pre-reading, pre-writing, and drawing, among others.
- Other activities that enhance literacy development include listening to oral narratives or folklore and taking part in traditional plays, games, rhyming songs, and dances. Exposing children to storytelling and reading is another great way of developing literacy.

Literacy activities are important for acquiring literacy skills. Exposure to a variety of these activities is beneficial to the learner. The more children are exposed to different literacy activities, the more their reading and writing skills are enhanced. Learning to read helps learners build up lifelong knowledge.

## What Are Literacy Activities?

Literacy activities are a range of different activities that lay a foundation for learners to acquire literacy and concretise the acquired skills. These activities start very early in life and include play, singing, storytelling, phonological and phonemic awareness, oral language, prereading, prewriting, and drawing, among others. Literacy activities are embedded in everyday activities and enhance literacy development. This suggests that the activities that the teacher employs should not only be classroom-based but rather reflect children's daily life experiences. For instance, play is a natural activity that children enjoy doing. As they are playing, they interact with and develop new vocabulary.

Other activities that enhance literacy development include listening to oral narratives/folklore and taking part in traditional plays, games, rhyming songs, and dances. Exposing children to storytelling and reading is another great way of developing literacy. Stories broaden children's listening and speaking skills as well as strengthen their vocabulary. Children who are routinely read to and immersed in rich talk about books and partake in various literacy activities are likely to acquire literacy skills earlier than those with less exposure to books<sup>1</sup>Campbell, F., Ramey, C., Pungello, E., Sparling, J., & Miller-Johnson, S. (2002). Early childhood education: Young adult outcomes from the abecedarian project. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 42–57.<sup>2</sup>Dickinson, D. McCabe,

A., & Essex, M. (2006). Cognitive and linguistic building blocks of early literacy. in Dickinson, D., & Neuman, S., (Eds). Handbook of early literacy 465 research, Vol. 2. New York, NY: Guilford<sup>3</sup>Neuman, S. B., Celano, D. (2006) The knowledge gap: Implications of leveling the playing field for low-income and middle-income children. Reading Research Quarterly, 41(2), 160-291..

These traditional activities expose children to new vocabulary that they may not have learnt at school. In order to develop a robust vocabulary and extensive conceptual knowledge, children need rich language input that enables them to understand what objects are called and how words work or go together.

It is important for teachers to embrace the reading of stories as a great way of enhancing literacy development, as you will learn in later chapters.

Another important point to note is that the type of literacy activity employed by the teacher should be dependent on the level of children being targeted. Stories, poems, and rhymes are important to beginner readers because they give the inspiration to practise reading. After the basic reading skills (letter-sound knowledge, syllables, and word reading) have been learned, it is important that children have access to many kinds of reading materials. This will enable them to practise with texts that are inspiring and interesting. Reading stories is essential for learning reading fluency and reading comprehension.

## **Literacy Activities as Precursors to Reading and**

# Writing

## Phonemic Awareness

- You could play word games such as “I spy.” The word games you play should be those that encourage your learners to learn sounds. “I spy” is a guessing game where one player chooses an object within sight of every other player and announces to the other players, *I spy with my little eye something beginning with the letter g-g-g. What do you think I’m looking at that starts with that sound?* Having heard the first letter of the object, the others get to guess what that object is. The learner who guesses the correct object becomes the spy. But you do not need to wait until the learners guess the right answer to rotate them. At most, give each learner a chance to become the spy.
- Ask your learners to give you words that start with the same sound as the letter you are targeting. Point out different types of print around the school premises with your learners – for example, print on walls, toilets, notice boards, etc., and ask your learners to sound out the first letters, and so forth. You can also do this by walking around the school with the learners and asking them to name the different objects they are seeing. Ask them to tell you the common sounds they hear in the names of the objects.
- Playfully ask your learners for words that rhyme. For example, *What other words sound like cat, mat...?* You could also ask your learners to make words that end with *ing*. Your learners could come up with such words as *sing, thing*, etc.

## Other Activities

- Encourage games that require imagination. Even if your learners cannot read yet, you can use games that require imagination as part of your literacy lessons. Give them an example, such as a poem about a lion. Then ask the children to discuss with a friend for a few minutes: *What kind of a lion would you be? Would you be a scary lion or a nice lion? What would you do? Where would you go?* When your learners learn to write, encourage them to write down what they discussed.
  
- Read to children, encourage them to ask questions and talk about what you've read, and surround them with language through literacy; reading aloud to children is tremendously important, but reading and *discussing the reading* is even more potent and beneficial<sup>4</sup>Whitehurst, G. J., Falco, F. L., Lonigan, C. J., Fischel, J. E., DeBaryshe, B. D., Valdez-Menchaca, M. C., & Caulfield, M. (1988). Accelerating language development through picture book reading. *Developmental Psychology*, 24(4), 552–559..
  
- Drawing pictures can inspire children to use their imagination even when they do not yet have the vocabulary to express all their ideas orally or in writing. For example, a child can first draw a picture and then describe it orally. The teacher or another child in the classroom can write down the description of the picture. The picture then becomes a resource of stories for children to read, and this will enhance literacy development.
  
- To teach new vocabulary, you could use the visual strategy. To do this, use available books that have pictures. Discuss the pictures, and ask the children to

talk about them.

## Phonics Activities

- The stories and poems available could be used to **practise the sound of the day**. Copy text from a book onto the board. Using the story on the board, say a sound and ask children to underline the corresponding letter on the board. Say a syllable, and ask children to underline all the similar syllables in the story.
- Use the words in the story for literacy tasks. For example, say: *I'm thinking of the word galu. Can you tell me other words that start with GA? Can you make other words that end with LU? How about KALULU?* Use the words of the story to make new words. Erase some letters or syllables on the board, and show how new words are formed.
- Encourage children to bring empty boxes/tins/cans/bottles of all sorts of things used at home, and ask them to name or sound out the letters on these materials. This helps bring the home into the classroom, and learners are then able to infer that sounds and words learned in the classroom are also found in the home environment. The children can also think of the initial or ending sounds of the names of these items or count how many syllables the words have.
- Computer-mediated literacy games have been studied and have proved to improve letter-sound knowledge in learners. Struggling learners have benefited from these interesting and child-centred learning resources. Computer and internet literacy can be important

components in reading and writing instruction. Research in Zambia on the computer-mediated resource GraphoGame™ over ten years has shown that using technology-driven materials together with teacher involvement increases the rate at which learners acquire basic reading skills  
source: [GraphoGame Research™](#)

- As a teacher, you should be open-minded when it comes to modifying instructional materials or literacy activities to meet the needs of your learners so that the materials and activities are meaningful to their environment. Well-designed instructional materials allow the classroom teacher to make modifications to suit personal preferences or meet individual student or class needs.

# Literacy Activities that Strengthen Acquired Literacy

## Storytelling and Story Reading

All learners, whether they know how to read or not, should be involved in storytelling and reading. Engaging all learners in these activities increases their chances of learning to read and write. It increases the acquisition of new vocabulary (words), improves fluency, comprehension, confidence levels, and self-worth, and enlarges their imagination and motivation to learn.

## The Importance of Storytelling

**a.** Story reading and telling provides learners with more vocabulary. Vocabulary is the ability to understand the **meaning of words** and use them in the correct context both in spoken and written language. As a teacher, you can do many things to support vocabulary acquisition regardless of your

pupils' background. You can set an example on how to use rich and diverse vocabulary in the local language and encourage your learners to read more.

**b. Storytelling and reading are good for emotional well-being:**

Reading a story provides a sense of emotional security to children and the ability to cope with feelings and different life situations. Listening to and reading stories and poetry can help children understand their feelings.

**c. Stories are good for the development of imagination:** Using imagination in play is important for children. Games that require imagination teach children to take different roles and solve problems. Listening to and reading stories is important for the development of imagination. Encourage children to use their imagination by giving them topics for storytelling and writing: *What is your dream profession? What would you do as a doctor or as a lawyer? What would it be like to be an astronaut or a football player? What is it like to be an elephant? Or a bird? Or a dog?*

**d. Storytelling and reading are important for reading comprehension.** Reading comprehension involves understanding written instructions and being able to find important information from a text. Reading comprehension is an essential life skill!

**Improving Learners' Comprehension through Storytelling and Reading**

In order to support the acquisition of listening and reading comprehension skills among learners, teachers should:

1. ensure that they engage learners in activities that involve reading comprehension;
2. ask a lot of questions about the stories and poems they have been reading;
3. encourage children to discuss the stories/poems they



have read and listened to.

Tip: Practicing comprehension skills **can be done every day**. You can start the day by asking children what they did at home on the previous day.

Give the children a simple example such as: *I saw my neighbour on the road. She was going home. She had bought five new chickens! They were for her cousin's wedding. Who did I meet on the road? Your uncle? The chief? No, it was the neighbour! What did the neighbour buy? A cow? A bicycle? No, it was the chickens!*

When asking questions keep a light tone so that the children are encouraged to try to guess answers. Encourage telling stories in a local language and give local language translations for English words that the children might use. This helps every child understand. Also encourage the children to tell the stories in the local languages they are most comfortable with, especially in a multilingual area.

You can see that a story for comprehension skills practise does not need to be long. Encourage children to tell their own stories. Ask for a volunteer to talk about his or her day. When one child has told his or her story, ask the other children questions about what they have just heard.

Learning to ask questions about oral stories is beneficial for later reading comprehension skills. When children learn to write, you can ask them to write short stories for other learners to read, or you can encourage them to read the story aloud to their peers in the class.

## **Practicing Reading Comprehension**

When practicing reading comprehension, engage the learners in activities that will help them remember the content of the story after it has been read. The activities could involve the

following:

- You can read the title of the story or poem aloud to the learners and then ask them to guess the story or poem content.
- You can skim through the illustrations in the story book in order to make the learners more eager to listen to the story.
- Using the story's/poem's illustrations, you can give learners an opportunity to guess the content of the story or poem.

These activities put the learners in a reading mood and motivate them to listen and read further. Once the story or poem is finally read out to the learners, they can remember it more easily and should be able to recall events and the vocabulary used in the story or poem.

Depending on the grade level, you can read two or three sentences aloud and then ask some questions. This will help you gauge whether the learners are following the reading or not. After every few sentences or a short paragraph, engage the learners in conversation about the story or poem, asking what they have heard thus far.

- You can ask what the story/poem teaches them. If they do not give any answer, prompt them.
- When you finish reading the story to the learners, you can find out if they were following the events of the story by asking them questions. You may also create questions about the story, put the students into small groups, and have them discuss the questions.
- After the stories or poems have been read, you can make

the lesson more exciting by asking learners to act out some of the events in the story or poem in front of others. Drama is another way to review and expand learners' understanding of plot structure and to support their learning of the writing process<sup>5</sup>Beyersdorfer, J.M., & Schauer, D.K. (1993). All work and no play? Add play production to literacy learning. *Journal of Reading*, 37, 4-10.. When students perform dramatic readings of text, the reading becomes an aesthetic experience. This experience promotes personal engagement and creates a learning environment where comprehension is natural and relevant<sup>6</sup>Cramer, N. V., Cheek, E. H., & Stringer, A. R. (2003). Literacy and the dramatic arts. *E-Journal of Teaching & Learning in Diverse Settings*, 1(1), 67-74..

## Encouraging Children to Read Stories or Tell Stories

A good teacher can engage every child in class in telling a story. Stories naturally create a good atmosphere in a classroom as the children sit attentively, focusing on the reader or the storyteller; and this can enhance their listening skills. A teacher can use methods that can help enhance reading and storytelling such as:

### **a) Story Reading Sessions for Everyone**

1. encouraging the children who are not literate to tell a story;
2. encouraging the children who are already literate to read aloud for the others;
3. encouraging students who can read and write to write their own stories and read them aloud to the class.

In a classroom situation, a shy child may be encouraged to tell a story as follows:

Shy learner: *I woke up in the morning and walked to school. I got in just before the rain.*

You can encourage the child by continuing the story as a teacher, as seen below:

Teacher: *That was very lucky! Once I was a child. I had my new shoes on when I was walking to school. It had been sunny for many days, and I wanted to show my shoes to my friends. All of a sudden, the rain started! I was feeling sad, but my friends helped clean my shoes.*

Continuing the story from what the child recounted shows them that you listened to their story and appreciated their **choice** of a story topic. This helps the child feel appreciated, become confident, and try to tell more complicated stories. When the children learn to write, encourage them to write these stories down.

## **b. The Importance of Reading Aloud to Children**

**Reading aloud to a child will aid her or him to develop comprehension and listening skills. When a child reads aloud she/he will be able to hear herself or himself, and that will help the child become fluent in reading.**

Decades of research have detailed the benefits of reading aloud to children. Educators, paediatricians, and policymakers alike recognise the immense advantages for those children who enter school thoroughly immersed in the rich, inventive language of picture books.

The interactive read-aloud, or the read-aloud plus text talk, strategy is based on three essential understandings. The read-aloud together with text talk strategy:

1. encourages the child to become an active learner during

book reading;

2. provides feedback that models more complex language;

3. challenges the child's knowledge and skills by raising the complexity of the conversation to a level just above the child's current ability<sup>7</sup>De Temple, J., & Snow, C. E. (2003). Learning words from books. In A. van Kleeck, S. A. Stahl, & E. B. Bauer (Eds.), *On reading books to children: Parents and teachers*, 16–36. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.; Lane and Wright, 2007).

### **The Critical Importance of the Interactive Read-Aloud**

- Researchers maintain that the most valuable aspect of the read-aloud is the experience with decontextualised language it gives to young children, requiring them to make sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now (Beck and McKeown, 2001).
- The interactive read-aloud results in student gains in vocabulary <sup>8</sup>Beck and McKeown, 2001, comprehension strategies, story schema<sup>9</sup>Pinnell, G. S., & Fountas, I. C. (2011). *Literacy beginnings: a prekindergarten handbook*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann., and concept development<sup>10</sup>Wasik, B. A., & Bond, M. A. (2001). Beyond the pages of a book: Interactive book reading and language development in preschool classrooms. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(2), 243–250. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.93.2.243>. However, simply inviting children to talk during interactive read-aloud sessions doesn't provide the needed learning boost. It's the *close reading* – and deep, intentional conversation about the text – that makes the difference.

## A Short Storytelling Session Plan:

- Start by asking the children to tell what happened to them yesterday (e.g., *Someone says: I saw a big dog on my way back home. The dog was running towards me. I was scared. Then I heard my neighbour Chomba shout behind me. It was his dog which was herding his cattle! I was not scared anymore and arrived home safely.*)
- Ask other children to ask questions about what was recounted (e.g., *What colour was the dog? How many cows does your neighbour have? Did you see other animals?*)
- Ask children to write words or sentences from the story in their notebook or on the board. What words were mentioned in the story? How are they written?
- Let children read the words or sentences together aloud. Reading the same sentences repeatedly can help children become more fluent in reading. Does someone want to see how quickly they can read the story without making mistakes?
- Erase the story from the board, and ask the children to write in their notebook what they can remember of it. Everyone can participate: Those who do not yet read can write the letters they remember seeing on the board while the others can write words or full sentences. Ask children to work together in pairs. Writing about what is read may also improve reading comprehension.
- Ask children to tell/write a different ending to the story. *What if it wasn't a dog that was seen on the road*

*but a lion? What if the dog had hurt himself and needed help?* Encourage children to write down what their friends said about the new changes in the story.

- Can you make a poem or song about the story that was told? What kind of poem would it be? What kind of song would it be?
- As you can see, you can practise all the basic reading skills (letter-sound connections, syllables, word formation, reading fluency, reading comprehension, etc.) just by asking a child in your class to recount what happened to him or her on the previous day!

## Using Poems in the Classroom

Here is one way in which poetry can be used to promote reading skills:

1. Find a poem or make one yourself. The poems do not need to be very long or complicated.
- Read the poem aloud. Write it on the board and read it again. Use the poem to teach rhymes, letter-sound connections, and syllables.
  - Ask the children to write the poem in their notebooks. Let the children read the poem aloud in pairs or in groups.
  - Let volunteer learners read the poem in front of an audience. **Do not allow peers to laugh** at any student who cannot read properly. Praise children for their brave

performance.

Encourage children to continue the poems with their own words.  
Turn their poems into songs!

Using songs in the process of learning to read and write is very useful. This process involves the use of alphabetic and vowel songs that are developed in the language that the learner is familiar with. Research has shown that initial literacy learning in alphabetic scripts involves the development of phonological awareness. Research has also shown that such phonological awareness can be effectively promoted by exposure to songs that repeat the critical sounds (phonemes) of the child's language that are used to signal differences in meaning. In languages with a relatively transparent alphabetic script (such as all of the Bantu languages of Zambia), each of these phonemes is represented by a distinct symbol or letter (grapheme).

## References

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## Research briefs

[Leisure Reading \(But Not Any Kind\) and Reading Comprehension Support Each Other – A Longitudinal Study Across Grades 1 and 9](#)

[Lifewide Learning for Early Reading Development](#)

## Additional reading

[Literacy Center Classroom Library Development for Government Schools](#)



# Videos

[Literacy Backpack 1](#)

[Literacy Backpack 2](#)

[Literacy Backpack 3](#)