



# Comprehensive Literacy

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## Eight Principles of Joyful and Powerful Teaching and Learning

**C**omprehensive literacy is based on key principles that are firmly rooted in decades of research about language, learning, teaching, assessment, and curriculum and shaped by extensive classroom testing on multiple continents. At its core, comprehensive literacy reflects a profound understanding about the best ways to live and learn with students in classrooms and schools. And while the first Global Teacher Prize winner Nancie Atwell eschews labels, her acclaimed and intellectually invigorating school, The Center for Teaching and Learning in Edgecomb, Maine brilliantly alive with classroom libraries, student research, and student-selected reading and writing, is regarded by many as the very bastion of comprehensive literacy. Nancie simply considers it excellent teaching—what you do as a responsible, caring teacher.

### **Eight Principles of Comprehensive Literacy**

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Renowned educator Dorothy Strickland once remarked that *how* comprehensive literacy educators teach is as important as *what* they teach. This list of comprehensive literacy principles attempts to capture the *how* and *what*—as well as the *why*.

**1. The art of teaching is *responsive*, guided by a continuous teaching, learning, assessing loop.**

Comprehensive literacy teachers engage in continuous assessment so they can, at any moment, respond specifically to each student's challenges and build on each student's strengths. Teachers watch, listen, and *know* every student across multiple instructional contexts: one-on-one, small group, and whole group—and engage students in self-reflection and assessment. And they teach with deep intention and compassion as well as with clear goals; every teaching move they make is informed by their knowledge of research together with their insights about each student drawn from multiple sources of formative and summative assessment.

## **2. Learning flows through language.**

Comprehensive literacy educators embrace the power and joy of language. They understand that learning flows through language, both oral and written; thus, they immerse students in conversation and text, creating thinking classrooms that resound with inquiry across the curriculum. Language—reading, writing, and talking across multimedia—provides the tools of discovery.

Every student has opportunities to talk, present, and lead. Teachers model asking open-ended questions and they use *dynamic learning language* (“Let’s give it a go”) rather than *fixed performance terms* (“That’s too hard for you”) (Johnston, 2013). In this way, teachers help every student develop a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006).

## **3. Oral language is the foundation of literacy.**

Comprehensive literacy educators understand that oral language development precedes literacy and also parallels it; oral and written language are mutually supportive developmental language processes. The quality of the language that children hear at home, including the books they hear read aloud, shapes their language development (Hart & Risley, 2003; Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013). Ultimately, learning to read is the “weaving together of multiple skills, understandings, and orientations, many of which have their developmental origins in infancy and toddlerhood” (Snow & Juel, 2008).

## **4. Reading and writing are purposeful and meaning-driven.**

Students learn to read by reading—and as they increase the volume of their reading with expert teacher support, they build their proficiency as readers. Comprehensive literacy teachers never skip a day of independent reading! Every day, they encourage their students to read self-selected fiction and nonfiction at school and at home, and through interactive read-alouds, shared and guided reading, and facilitated book clubs help their students practice reading in a smoothly orchestrated way, building and strengthening their reading power and stamina.

All of this is true for writing as well; students learn to write by writing for wide and varied purposes with the help of an expert teacher. And both reading and writing are mutually beneficial; students learn to control both the global meaning of written language as well as all the particulars (sounds, letters, words, and the like) while they use written language to learn. Teachers confer with students, celebrating their accomplishments while always monitoring, assessing, and teaching.

## **5. Classrooms and schools are vibrant, vital learning communities.**

Classrooms and schools brim with print and student projects. Every student feels at home, supported, encouraged, and loved. Creativity, curiosity, and collaboration are the learning pulse of the classroom—and a robust library is the heart of the classroom. Students enjoy easy access to many (ideally, 1,500-plus) high quality texts across all genres.

Working together, students learn to ask their own questions across the curriculum and follow a line of inquiry. Effective teachers understand that the nature of reading and writing intensifies when students are driven by real-world questions to search for real answers that they then share with a real audience. Students learn to read with purpose, power, and passion (Duke, 2015).

## **6. Students are self-directed learners who thrive with expert, thoughtful instruction.**

Comprehensive literacy teachers place students' well-being and academic success at the center of everything they do. They rely on the Gradual Release of Responsibility model to differentiate instruction (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983): First, teachers demonstrate a new understanding and then encourage the whole class to give it a go. Finally, they invite students to try it on their own or with a partner.

Always, teachers keep their eye on foundational skills making sure that their students are learning to control, within the context of meaningful reading and writing, sound/letter relationships, word recognition, fluency, phonics, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. If direct instruction is needed, teachers provide it. As literacy researcher Michael Pressley (2003) once explained: “. . . the goal of the comprehensive literacy teacher [is] to move students ahead, so that every day there is new learning; every day students are working at the edge of their competencies and growing as readers and writers.”

## **7. Families are their children's first and most important teachers.**

Comprehensive literacy teachers value family and community, honor cultural and linguistic diversity, and support each child's home language and culture. Teachers recognize that every family's stories and funds of knowledge (Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013) represent invaluable learning experiences for both the family and the school.

Comprehensive literacy teachers also provide ongoing parent education so parents understand the specifics of what they can do at home to help their children as readers, writers, and learners. The aim is open communication and collaboration with families. Bottom line: parents are valued members of the school community and are always welcome in the classroom.

## 8. Teachers are professional decision-makers.

Comprehensive literacy teachers embrace their own professional learning lives and align their practices with their theoretical understandings of language and learning. They also engage in continual self-renewal and maintain a robust learning life enriched by onsite, offsite, and online professional learning communities, book study groups, exchanges on social media, and more. Additionally, they fill their classrooms with authentic text—high quality YA and children’s literature, newspapers and magazines, a wide range of multimedia, and access to primary sources such as historical correspondence and diaries, scientific documents, and the like.

In sum, comprehensive literacy teachers respect their students as powerful learners and aim to help them explore their own questions, shape their own values, and imagine lives beyond the ones they live—while helping them develop the confidence, understanding, and skills they need for both academic and personal success. In comprehensive literacy classrooms, teachers and students love reading, writing, and learning. Nancie Atwell says it best:

*We show students we love them by looking after them as readers. We give them time every day to curl up with intriguing stories. We scour the shelves of bookstores and pore over reviews in search of titles that will delight them. And we acknowledge the essential should in teaching reading: every student should read for the pleasure of it.*

# Comprehensive Literacy Framework

Effective teachers create strength-based, high-quality literacy instruction that helps all students learn with purpose, proficiency, power, and joy. Every day, comprehensive literacy teachers organize their instruction around a Gradual Release of Responsibility and whole group, small group, and independent practice as they work to:

## Strengthen Oral Language Skills

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- set the stage for strong reading and writing skills later in life.
- invite children into extended discourse that promotes understandings beyond the here and now.
- promote basic vocabulary and grammar, which are essential to comprehension.
- value emerging bilinguals' native language, recognizing that a strong foundation in that language promotes school achievement in English.

## Build Foundational Language Skills and Conventions

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- help children learn the alphabetic principle and develop phonological awareness.
- strengthen students' abilities to apply written conventions such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- expand students' vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.
- foster word study, recognizing that 90 percent of the words in a text are drawn from 4,000 simple word families.

## Share Interactive Read-Alouds

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- increase students' attention spans and listening skills, bolster vocabulary and conceptual knowledge, and develop comprehension strategies and story schema.
- enable all students to access and enjoy the rich language of complex texts.
- refine students' understanding of text—genre, format, literary elements, and text structures and features.
- develop a literate classroom culture and shared language around books; fosters a lifelong love of reading.

## **Practice Guided Reading**

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- place students on an accelerated course to reading with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.
- offer a “just right” challenge that helps each student advance as an independent reader.
- ensure that, every day, students read texts that are within their control, given the strategies and knowledge they have.
- help students stretch their skills as readers, with increasingly challenging, conceptually rich, complex texts.

## **Promote Independent Reading**

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- help students discover their identities as readers and expand their understanding of the world.
- build strategic problem-solving skills that promote high level comprehension.
- build a robust vocabulary and deepen analytical prowess and an ability to talk and write about text.
- offer innumerable academic and social-emotional benefits.

## **Promote Independent Writing**

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- encourage writing for multiple purposes and audiences, across genres and modes—narrative, informational, and argumentative (opinion).
- help students control the traits of writing: ideas, voice, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, conventions, and presentation.
- help students use writing as a thinking tool to organize, consolidate, and integrate ideas.
- help students tap their creativity and strengthen their ability to compose.

## **Integrate Reading and Writing**

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- reinforce reading and writing as reciprocal acts, with each informing the other.
- help students read to learn, write to learn, and make meaning in the process—the primary goal of instruction.

- realize the benefits of writing about text—and mirror the deep thinking students should do when they read.
- enable students to be explicit about text evidence—writing information from their reading.

### **Encourage Purposeful Reading and Writing**

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- help students engage in ambitious questioning and hands-on inquiry.
- foster critical thinking and problem solving.
- encourage students to write clearly and convincingly, revising and editing their work to share it with a real audience.
- help students embrace their identities as purposeful and powerful readers and writers.

### **Engage Families and the Community**

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- embrace the Dual Capacity Framework, establishing effective family-school partnerships that support children from cradle to career.
- build the collective partnership capacity between families and schools through the four C's: *capabilities*, *connections*, *confidence*, and *cognition*.
- help families understand the importance of immersing children in rich, ongoing conversation about daily home activities and read-aloud books.
- honor each family's cultural "funds of knowledge"—while providing school-based scaffolds.

### **Optimize Learning Supports**

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- maximize learning supports by fully integrating them into instruction and school management.
- provide physical, social, emotional, and academic assistance that enables students to succeed at school.
- provide responsive, personalized instruction that meets the needs of all learners.
- promote strong leadership that works to build a full continuum of essential school-community learning supports.



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