

## **DISCIPLINARY LITERACY FOR ELLS**

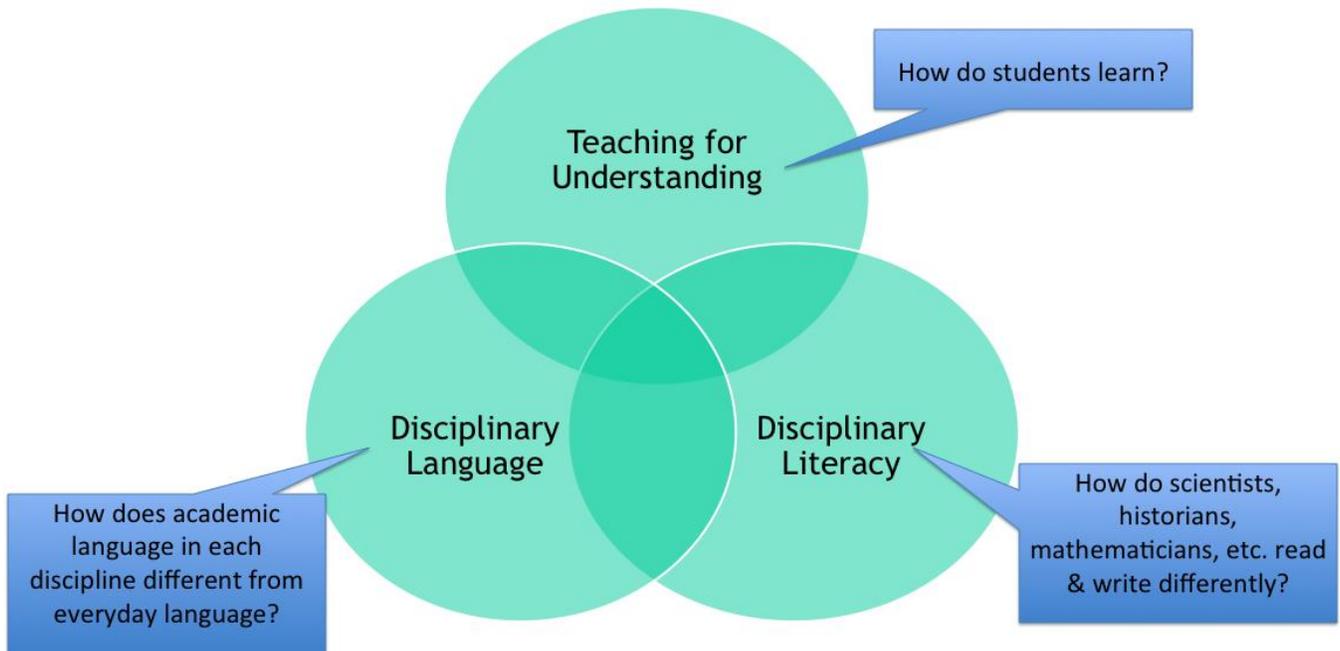
### **WHAT IS DISCIPLINARY LITERACY**

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Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized skills and knowledge that students use to read and write about content in the academic disciplines, such as science, social studies, mathematics, and literature. Each academic discipline has its own particular ways of making meaning from texts, so the skills and knowledge that help students read and write some texts for particular purposes will not be the same for other texts and other purposes. For instance, math students reading algebra word problems to solve them will use very different strategies, content knowledge, and language knowledge than science students reading a textbook chapter to learn about earthquakes, both of which use different skills and knowledge from history students reading a speech by Abraham Lincoln to analyze his perspective on slavery. Unlike other approaches to literacy across the content areas, teaching disciplinary literacy starts with the authentic goals for reading and writing held by real scientists, historians, mathematicians, and literary critics. All students deserve access to these complex disciplinary practices and ELLs, in particular, need thoughtful and explicit instructional support to learn to use them.

## HOW DO I START TO THINK ABOUT TEACHING ELLS IN THE CONTENT AREAS?

One way to start to plan instruction for ELLs in the content areas is to consider three overlapping lenses: Teaching for Understanding, Disciplinary Language, and Disciplinary Literacy. Using each of these three lenses starts with a foundational guiding question (see the boxes below). By considering these questions, teachers in each content area can start to unpack the aspects of their discipline that will be challenging to ELLs and need to be taught explicitly.



## WHAT ARE DISCIPLINARY READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES?

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### Why am I Reading?

#### Purposes for reading differ:

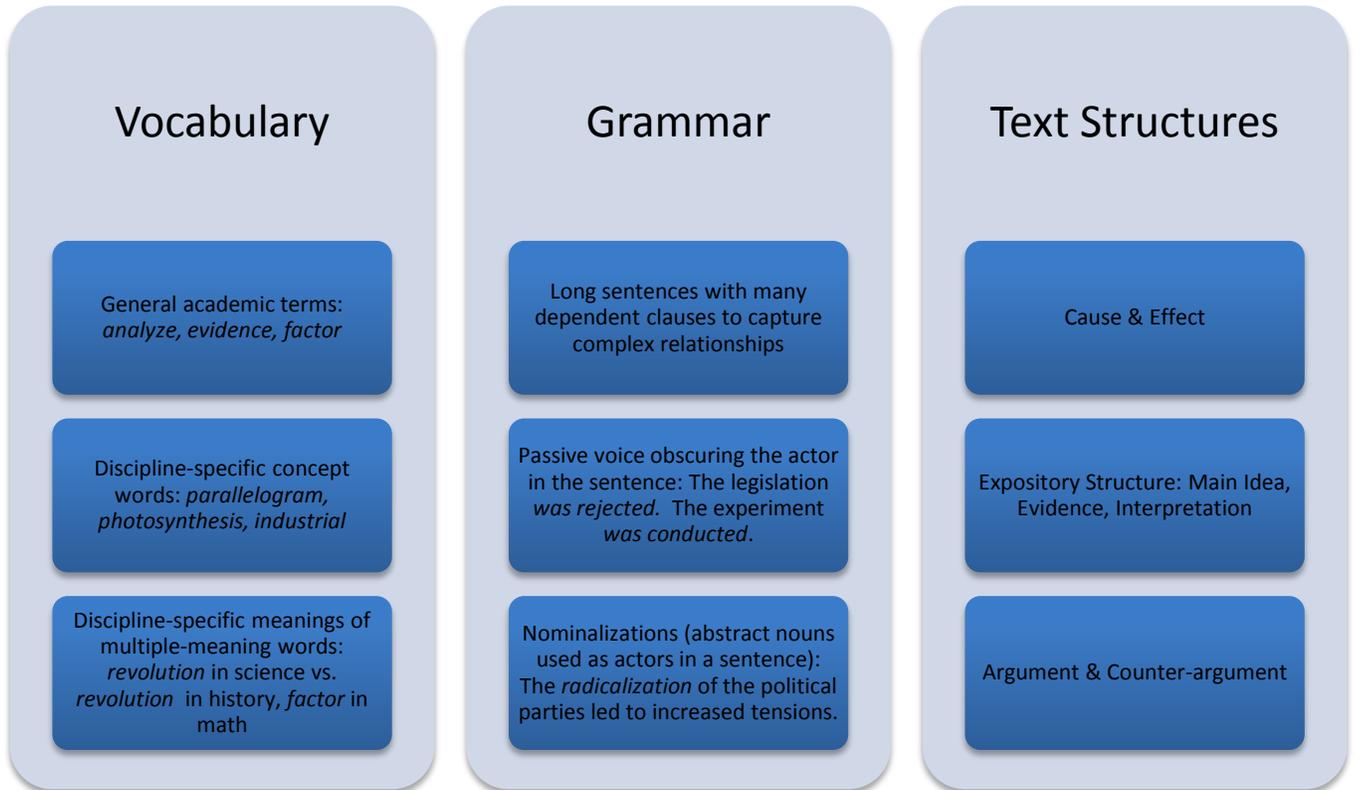
- Reading to make a historical argument
- Reading to solve a problem
- Reading to understand a scientific system
- Reading to learn the steps in a process
- Reading to analyze use of literary devices
- Reading to compare points of view.
- So, setting a real purpose before reading is key!

#### Different purposes lead to different strategies for:

- Ordering one's reading
  - Historians look at the source first.
  - Scientists turn to the tables & graphs.
- Identifying important information
  - Visuals can be essential or decorative.
  - Main ideas come first or are revealed.
- Ignoring less important information
  - Descriptive details could be essential in a poem but extraneous to a chapter about the circulatory system.
  - Understanding the author's point of view could be important to interpreting a historical document, but irrelevant to a science chapter.

## WHAT MAKES DISCIPLINARY LANGUAGE UNIQUE AND CHALLENGING?

The academic language of the disciplines differs from everyday English in many ways. The vocabulary, grammar, and text structures of the disciplines can be particularly challenging for ELLs, even those who have developed the basic English skills they need for everyday conversations. Below are just some examples of disciplinary language features:



## FIVE RESEARCH-BASED METHODS FOR TEACHING ELLS IN THE DISCIPLINES

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1. Articulate specific language and content objectives.
  - Content Objective: Students will be able to pose a question to be investigated and document the findings.
  - Language Objective: Students will be able to discuss observations and write conclusions using complete sentences.
2. Anchor instruction using short videos, visuals, and graphic organizers.
  - Start with a common experience (video, hands-on activity, provocative visual) to build background knowledge and provide a concrete anchor for more abstract discussions.
  - Use various graphic organizers for thinking and writing about content.
3. Integrate explicit academic vocabulary instruction.
  - Address general academic words, discipline-specific words, and discipline-specific meanings of multiple-meaning words.
  - Provide both definitions and rich contextual information.
  - Plan multiple meaningful exposures to the words.
  - Give opportunities to use the words in speaking and writing.
4. Provide daily opportunities for students to talk about content in pairs or small groups.
  - Pair and group students heterogeneously, so they can teach and learn from each other.
  - Structure their interactions so expectations for what they should be talking about – and how they should talk – are clear.
  - Scaffold students' use of disciplinary language through sentence starters and modeling.
5. Provide writing opportunities to extend students' understanding of content.
  - Plan both daily "writing to learn" activities and longer, formal process writing assignments.
  - Use writing to informally assess students' language and content knowledge.
  - Scaffold students' use of newly taught disciplinary language through modeling.
  - Hold students accountable for using disciplinary language.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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- Baker et al. (forthcoming). *Teaching English learners in the elementary and middle grades*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
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- Zwiers, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms, grades 5-12*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.