

English Language Arts Reflections

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

INTRODUCTION

How do teachers ensure that the current English language arts programs of study are implemented in their classrooms? How do administrators measure the implementation and effectiveness of Alberta's English language arts program in their school? The goal of *English Language Arts Reflections* is to support the implementation of the currently prescribed English Language Arts Senior High School Program of Studies (2003), English Language Arts K–9 Program of Studies (2000) and the Knowledge and Employability English Language Arts (8–12) Program of Studies (Draft). Although these are three documents with some differences, the English language arts program from Kindergarten to Grade 12 has a common philosophy and a similar organization; therefore, the principles included here will apply to all programs.

This document is organized to parallel the *Senior High School English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* (2003). Occasionally, there will be references to this guide that will be of specific interest to senior high school teachers. Upper elementary and junior high school teachers may find many helpful ideas as well. All English language arts documents can be found on the Alberta Education Web site at http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/k_12/curriculum/bySubject/english/.

English Language Arts Reflections features two complementary sections:

- a program assessment checklist designed for collegial reflection on a school program's strengths and needs
- a brief written commentary about criteria included in the program assessment checklist to highlight important program features, authorized resources and the *Senior High School English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* (2003).

The package should assist administrators and English language arts teachers to:

- plan units using the programs of study
- employ the *Senior High School English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* as a professional development resource
- participate in assessment of collegial professional development needs and in related professional development activities related to the programs of study
- identify and use current resources to support significant features of the programs of study
- determine individual professional development priorities and planning related to the programs of study. Individual professional development options include reading, discussion, mentoring, conferences, district and onsite workshops, and project work.

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PROGRAM ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST

The following checklist articulates program features emphasized in Alberta's authorized senior high school English language arts program. The checklist has been designed to assist administrators and teachers in planning and implementing instruction so that students effectively learn outcomes listed in the programs of study.

Individual teachers, especially beginning teachers, may choose to employ the checklist to consider three critical questions:

- What are the strengths and needs of the program that I offer my students?
- What can I learn from the *Guide to Implementation* and other sources?
- What methods will I use to assess how my personal professional learning has assisted students to achieve outcomes in the programs of study?

In the formative supervision of teachers, especially beginning teachers, administrators will also consider these three questions. The administrator's goal, of course, is professional discussion and feedback founded on the current program's presentation of best practice. Groups of teachers, possibly a larger school's English language arts department, and administrators may choose to complete part or the entire checklist to begin discussion about program strengths and needs. Once a group of teachers and administrators has completed the checklist individually, they might usefully discuss:

- program features assessed as strengths in the school
- program features assessed as current priorities for coordination and professional development in the school.

When administrators and teachers disagree in their assessments, they step back and view the disagreements as an opportunity rather than a problem. Use the disagreement to talk about what a classroom observer will notice as a teacher implements the ELA program. Listen carefully. Be prepared to learn. Seek competent external advice if an agreement cannot be reached.

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GOALS

Professional learning groups wisely choose no more than a few program features for coordination and professional development in a busy school year. A “We Agree” statement usefully consolidates priorities for groups. An example follows:

Our school’s ELA department’s collegial focus for this year is to improve our students’ ability to complete tasks metacognitively.

We will emphasize:

- student articulation of strategies before, during and after the completion of an assignment, at least five times during the course
- individual student goal setting regularly throughout the term.

In addition, teachers and administrators should determine the data and informal measures they will use to assess their progress toward goals. They might also plan to communicate their instructional focus goals and plans to parents, students and other teachers in the school. Teachers and administrators should regularly schedule meeting times to discuss challenges and successes in working together toward selected goals. As a measure of progress, the checklist may be completed at set times in the term, including the beginning and end of the school year.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Program
Strength

Program
Need

INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING AND DIFFERENTIATION

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Plans incorporate Alberta Education's currently authorized outcomes and resources.

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Plans account for timelines, themes or topics, outcomes to be emphasized, resources, learning activities and assessment techniques.

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Plans account for differentiation in outcomes, resources, activities, assessment, time and mediation.

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Plans include attention to strategies and student choice of content and approach.

Alberta's English language arts program is outcomes-based—meaning that each course contains specific learner expectations. All aspects of a student's English language arts learning, including resources, learning activities and assessments, should be clearly referenced to specific outcomes from the programs of study.

While some schools and jurisdictions require teachers to submit long-range plans, it is the short-range plan that is critical for English language arts. The most effective unit plans respond to student needs and interests that cannot be predicted. When discussing programs with teachers, administrators should review the unit plan for the current work in progress. Teachers should be prepared to support their unit plans by offering a specific and rational account of major outcomes, resources, timelines, learning activities and assessments. As they progress through the term, students should meet all outcomes from the programs of study; they will often work with several outcomes in a single learning activity. In their unit plans developed for the term, teachers will list only those outcomes of major focus; those outcomes that will also be central in learning assessments. Brief notes about options for differentiation should be included in unit plans; e.g., notes about alternate activities, assessments, extra time and support for specified students.

Authorized resources should be emphasized in student learning activities. These resources represent current content expectations for students and have been selected for their fit with the programs of study. The teachers' guides for authorized resources contain useful planning suggestions and tools to link outcomes, resources, learning activities and assessments.

Alberta Education's *Senior High School English Language Arts Guide to Implementation* offers unit planning samples and forms as well as scoring guides and rubrics. Many of these can be downloaded from the CD-ROM included in the guide. Rather than trying to read through the entire guide, teachers are wise to use the document as a reference to answer questions and as a source for specific material.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Program
Strength

Program
Need

ASSESSMENT

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Assessment of student learning is aligned to prescribed outcomes emphasized in a unit of work.

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Student progress is assessed through a variety of methods—checklists, observations, conferences and rubrics.

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Language arts assessment emphasizes performance assessment but includes prespecified response and observational assessment.

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Assessment of student learning emphasizes specific feedback, as well as self and peer assessment.

In an outcomes-based program, assessment should relate directly to outcomes emphasized in a unit of work. Although some educators might argue that only those outcomes tested in diploma examinations and achievement tests should be focal points for instruction, this is counterproductive. Research clearly underlines that student knowledge of strategies is directly related to success in completing tasks, especially reading and writing tasks. In addition, research into learning styles and multiple intelligences informs us that students skillful in outcomes related to listening, viewing, speaking and representing apply these skills to the reading and writing outcomes emphasized in diploma examinations. Therefore, educators should attend to strategic outcomes in the programs of study. Teachers who ignore the strategic outcomes, as well as listening, viewing, speaking and representing outcomes, disadvantage students by their omission.

This broad view of communication outcomes is supported in the Conference Board of Canada's *Employability 2000+* document available at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/education/learning-tools/pdfs/esp2000.pdf>. Reading comprehension and writing skill are emphasized, as are speaking and listening ability, the use of a variety of communication technologies, collaborative work in a team, the management of information, independent thinking and problem solving, participation in projects and tasks, and positive attitudes toward others. All of these employment assets are also emphasized in the English language arts programs of study.

Performance assessment, i.e., assessment that uses rubrics, should be balanced with ongoing informal observational assessment and tests that require a predetermined answer. A review of a teacher's mark book or assessment record should indicate a balance among performance assessment, observational assessment and prespecified response tests.

Finally, students should regularly engage in self-assessment and peer assessment activities. Research clearly indicates the importance of self- and pre-assessment in learning. Regular goal setting by students is a desirable program feature.

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GENERAL OUTCOME

1 EXPLORATORY LANGUAGE

Program
Strength

Program
Need

☐☐

Students explore issues through questioning, discussing, making notes, journaling, diagramming or role-playing.

☐☐

Students articulate plans for completing tasks and consider personal background knowledge, preferences and strategies in planning.

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As they complete tasks, students reflect on and note what they have come to understand about themselves as learners.

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Students set goals for future learning.

General Outcome 1 stresses that we use language to learn, to think, and to understand ourselves as well as to communicate with others. Exploratory language outcomes are frequently learned as part of a reading, viewing and listening task as students build background knowledge, explore interpretations and share understandings. Exploratory language will also occur as written work is planned, drafted and revised, and as formal speaking and representing activities are planned, composed and presented. Teachers and administrators should celebrate classrooms in which students are actively involved in using language to learn and explore.

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GENERAL OUTCOME

2 COMPREHENDING TEXTS

Program
Strength

Program
Need

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In addition to print texts, students interpret oral language, and visual and multimedia texts.

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Students regularly analyze context: purpose, audience, role, subject matter, content, voice, layout or form.

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Students articulate personally effective strategies to interpret print, oral, visual and multimedia texts.

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Students employ textual evidence to support interpretations.

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Students study a variety of texts; e.g., book-length fiction and nonfiction, drama, poetry, short stories, and visual and multimedia texts.

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Students frequently talk about, write about and represent connections between new texts, familiar texts and personal experiences.

Administrators and beginning teachers should note the current programs of study expand the conception of a text beyond the printed word. Students are expected to interpret visual representations, spoken presentations, film and other media in addition to printed texts.

Students demonstrate greater comprehension when they are able to articulate how they interpret text before, during and after their reading, viewing or listening tasks.

Administrators should celebrate programs in which teachers model strategies and encourage students to discover those that work best for them. These strategies are central to the major program emphasis of metacognition.

General Outcome 2 attends to specific matters of content and form. As students learn specific formal elements such as irony or atmosphere, they should be able to relate the author's technique to purpose, audience and content.

Note that General Outcome 2 contains an extensive list of outcomes implying that the comprehension of a variety of texts should be a major program focus. In its introduction, the senior high school program of studies specifies minimum requirements for the study of oral, print, visual and multimedia texts. Teachers and administrators should ensure that these minimum requirements are met.

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GENERAL OUTCOME

3 MANAGING IDEAS AND INFORMATION

Program
Strength

Program
Need

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Students regularly assess their purpose, their relationship to the audience and the context of a communication.

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Students plan to gather and organize information.

☐☐

Students judge sources, as well as the value of information, related to purpose and audience.

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Students review and select print, oral, Internet and multimedia texts, as well as human resources, to complete tasks.

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Students organize information toward clear and effective presentation of generalizations and conclusions.

General Outcome 3 recognizes the importance of strategies and skills related to planning, completing and reporting inquiry and research. Students are expected to employ human, print and technological sources to gather, assess, organize and present information.

Research and inquiry can be readily incorporated into student work with a variety of language arts texts; e.g., background on an author, literary period or technical form. Through careful interdisciplinary planning, such as planning for humanities courses, research and inquiry outcomes can be learned in other subjects as well. Of course, this is true of many outcomes in the English language arts programs of study. Teachers and administrators wisely challenge teachers to plan for cross-curricular attention to language, research and inquiry outcomes. In addition to advocacy of cross-curricular professional development and program alignment in research and inquiry outcomes, administrators might encourage professional development and cross-curricular disciplinary coordination in the following topics:

- metacognition
- comprehension strategies
- composition strategies
- collaborative learning
- exploratory language.

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GENERAL OUTCOME

4 CREATING TEXTS

Program
Strength

Program
Need

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Students consider purpose, audience, situation and format in planning the creation of oral, print, visual and multimedia texts.

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Students select personally effective and appropriate prewriting strategies such as interviewing, webbing, dramatizing and diagramming.

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Students identify and select drafting and revision strategies and provide reasons for their choices.

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Students create a variety of texts; e.g; personal response, analytical or critical response, prose poetry, and script writing; as well as oral, visual and multimedia texts.

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Students regularly engage in revision activities with an emphasis on applying specific criteria related to thought and detail, organization, word choice and sentence patterns. Accuracy in punctuation, capitalization and grammar is also emphasized.

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Students employ appropriate technology to plan and present communications.

Administrators and beginning teachers should note the clear message in the programs of study that creating texts extends beyond creating written texts. Throughout the term, students should engage in formal speaking tasks as well as representational tasks. Examples of formal speaking tasks include readers' theatre, prepared oral interpretation of literature, debate and public speaking. Note that these speaking tasks integrate other language arts. Representation, one of the six language arts in the programs of study, includes all forms of nonverbal communication such as posters, mime, gestures and accompanying sound effects.

While General Outcome 4 emphasizes strategies related to the creation of a text, it also stresses writing strategies. Students who are able to articulate how they work to compose a text before, during and after drafting compose more proficiently than students who are unable to articulate this strategy. Administrators should encourage the modelling of text creation strategies with an emphasis on student selection of strategies that work best for them. These practices foster the major program emphasis of metacognition.

General Outcome 4 encourages students to think through the process of composition from the analysis of task and form to planning, composing, revising and presenting. Classroom practice should mirror this process with attention to related specific outcomes.

Note that the senior high school program of studies specifies minimum requirements for text creation.

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GENERAL OUTCOME

5 EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Program
Strength

Program
Need

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Students demonstrate respect for others as well as courtesy in interactions.

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Students assess stereotypical representations in a variety of texts.

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Students work in varied small group patterns to complete collaborative tasks.

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Students celebrate their own work as well as the work of fellow students.

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Students plan and assess group interaction skills and strategies.

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Students frequently collaborate to create and to interpret texts.

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Students actively participate in community events.

General Outcome 5 emphasizes that learning is a collaborative, as well as an individual, undertaking. Community involvement and employment frequently demand working in a group toward common goals. Collaborative work builds community in diverse classrooms. The Conference Board of Canada's document, *Employability Skills 2000+*, is useful to teachers and students as it supports the importance, in any future employment endeavour, of working with others to complete tasks. Students who lack the ability to collaborate will be disadvantaged when seeking future employment options.

Collaborative learning should not be confused with group work. In group work, students sometimes seek help from peers to complete an individual task. In collaborative learning, students work together to create a product, or to complete a task, that depends on several contributions. Furthermore, a collaborative learning philosophy includes instruction in social skills and strategies.

In the planning of instructional units, beginning teachers should consider natural opportunities for collaborative learning. At the start of the school year, teachers often keep groups limited in size and time. Early in the term, begin collaborative activities with a few minutes of common sense discussion followed by an informal assessment; e.g., a checklist. Encourage each student to set goals for future collaborative learning. Administrators encourage productive collaborative learning across grades and subjects.

NOTE