



## Supporting English Language Arts During the Pandemic: Meaningful Language and Literacy Practice

Whether students in Manitoba are engaged in English language arts (ELA) through in-class, blended, or remote learning, they must have opportunities in Kindergarten to Grade 12 to use language in meaningful and purposeful ways. Educators need to plan for this learning to happen. This is especially important as students make sense of, take action, and thrive during this uniquely complex time.

The [ELA Curriculum Framework](#) supports educators in designing rich language and literacy learning experiences so that students can enact the ELA practices, elements, and grade descriptors. As you think about what language and literacy learning will look like for this school year, visit the Manitoba Professional Learning Environment (Maple) at [www.mapleforem.ca](http://www.mapleforem.ca) and use the [ELA Conceptual Framework](#) and [Guiding Principles](#) to guide your planning. How will you engage your learning communities? How will you design meaningful and purposeful learning?

### Engage Your Learning Communities

#### 1. Reach out to students and families to work together

The *ELA Curriculum Framework* is grounded in the belief that students are not alone in language and literacy learning. Students, teachers, other school personnel, families, and communities work together to value, promote, and develop language and literacies for active participation in all areas of their lives. Relationships really are at the centre of all that we do, including planning for meaningful language and literacy experiences. Now, more than ever, it is important to reach out to students and families to understand their stories and experiences over the past few months. Create a learning community that is safe and builds trust. Consider multiple ways to reach out and connect with your students and families, including daily or weekly two-way communication channels.

## **Our Students**

Let students know that they matter, that you care, and that their voice is critical in shaping their language and literacy learning and the language and literacy learning of others. Value students' identities by tapping into their wonderings, strengths, and interests, and by providing them with many ways to express who they are and who they are becoming. The following are some ways to get to know your students:

- planning for rich class discussions
- sharing personal objects
- creating digital collages representing their identities and ideas
- celebrating students' strengths (such as hosting a Flipgrid talent show)

With so many changes happening, remind students of their power and agency by acknowledging them as competent decision makers. Be mindful and intentional about co-designing rich learning experiences (RLEs) that are meaningful to students by ensuring that you

- find out what matters to your students (How will the RLE connect to the communities in which they live, work, and play?)
- leverage students' strengths and ideas when co-creating protocols and embedding student roles meaningfully into RLEs
- value students' contributions by acting upon them to inform next steps to deepen learning and support student leadership

## **Our Families**

Conversations should reassure parents and caregivers about safety measures, create excitement about upcoming learning experiences, and highlight the important role parents and caregivers play in their child's language and literacy learning. To understand what works best for your students and communities, take steps such as the following to build relationships with families:

- host a virtual meeting/tour of your classroom and/or school
- arrange for a one-on-one physically distanced outdoor meeting (depending on current public health guidelines)
- create a class newsletter that includes images of their child's learning environment
- connect with families over the phone, through video conferencing, or by email (Ask families how they prefer to communicate.)



Connecting learning to the lives of students and their families benefits both our students and our communities, especially during the pandemic. Tapping into community resources will be different this year, but it is possible. To encourage parents and caregivers to share their stories, strengths, and gifts, plan for rich and relevant learning to happen by

- arranging for parents and caregivers to be virtual guest speakers
- inviting students to record their families sharing thoughts, ideas, and artifacts related to the RLE

## 2. Participate in formal and informal networking/collaboration

As we follow public health guidelines and implement the *ELA Curriculum Framework* for in-class, blended, and remote learning, collaborate within and across schools to re-imagine how we can deepen our professional learning and inquiry together. Establish yourself as a teacher-researcher by using existing or new professional learning groups, both locally and provincially. In addition to talking to your administration and being active in your school-wide professional learning community, take part in a smaller network for focused inquiry and support. Reach out to other educators at your school or create a cross-divisional group to meet regularly online or in person with physical distancing. These meetings could include

- sharing how everyone is doing, both personally and professionally
- discussing wonderings and language and literacy observations
- sharing documentation to discuss planning and innovating within RLEs

[The ELA Place](#) on Maple has been updated to support in-class, blended, and remote learning environments. Here, you can

- explore the *ELA Curriculum Framework*
- find and share design supports
- engage in professional inquiry
- start or join a conversation in “Edu Talk”

## Design Purposeful and Meaningful Learning

Use the **conceptual framework as a critical touchstone** to design RLEs in ELA during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students need to use language purposefully, whether they are engaged in in-person or remote learning. They should still be using the four interconnected and interrelated practices to *listen, speak, read, write, view, and represent*. Using language in meaningful contexts that reflect students' strengths, interests, and lived experiences allows them to transfer and apply their learning to the world around them. Instruction that is not connected to RLEs should be **less than half** of ELA instructional time.

When students are engaging in a variety of learning contexts, it is even more important to create a positive collaborative learning culture. Plan for students to collaborate and use language in various contexts to ensure their safety, health, and well-being. Include these critical considerations when designing purposeful, meaningful language and literacy experiences for in-class, blended, and remote learning:

### 1. Plan for relationship building and student collaboration

Language and literacy learning is social. Even though students may be physically distanced and sitting individually, we need to find ways to allow them to collaborate and share their ideas to deepen their understandings. Consider ways of creating what some call "home groups" for your students to collaborate safely in outdoor classrooms, online platforms, or in person with physical distancing maintained. Support positive group work by

- planning multiple opportunities for students to work together across various contexts
- providing clear expectations and processes for collaborative work and discussions
- encouraging students to share notes of appreciation with their peers to help them connect to each other and nurture their social-emotional well-being

Don't ignore the elephant in the room. Your students may be experiencing anxiety or fear with the pandemic. Provide opportunities for your students to safely discuss things that matter to them in a sensitive and balanced way. Integrate texts into your RLE as springboards for students to discuss loss, challenges, and resiliency.

As you and your students engage in learning together in person or remotely, you may find it challenging to communicate with each other while physically distancing, wearing masks, or using technology. You can strengthen communication by

- using multimodal forms of communication to reinforce verbal cues and make information more accessible for your students
- encouraging students to use built-in features on digital platforms to respond to information, such as using the "thumbs-up" and "raise hand" buttons

## 2. Create meaningful experiences to use language

Your students' English language arts skills, strategies, attitudes, values, and behaviours are developed through rich learning experiences that allow them to enact the four ELA practices. These experiences involve your students as co-designers and connect meaningfully to their communities. Plan, observe, and intentionally reflect on student learning to ensure students have opportunities to enact the four ELA practices, elements, and grade band descriptors.

### **What is the focus of your RLE?**

Given world events and the changes that have taken place in the lives of our students, they may have many different curiosities. Considering your students' interests, other curricular areas, texts, and everyday events in their world, what broad questions could your students be exploring? For example, what changes have occurred in their communities since COVID-19 started? What effect has this had on their lives? What questions do they have about these changes?

By situating learning within a relevant, authentic context, you can build deep, culturally responsive, and contextualized learning experiences for your students. Although field trips and other community-based experiences are limited during the pandemic, your students can still

- explore outdoor areas and visit virtual places such as museums, local attractions, and cultural centres
- Engage with virtual guest speakers, such as expert community members, authors, and students in other schools, to offer windows into the wider community

### **Where are students in their language and literacy learning?**

Educators will need to plan for the diversity of language and literacy experiences that students have had over the last few months. Some students will have continued with rich experiences at home, and other students will need recovery learning. Students really do come into our classrooms having gained language and literacy competencies through their lived experiences. In order to unpack these lived experiences and find out where they are in their language and literacy learning, start by designing an authentic RLE. In addition to divisionally mandated assessment tools, it is necessary to provide your students with authentic opportunities to use the four ELA practices to show and reflect on their learning and think about their next steps.

The *ELA Curriculum Framework* gives you the agency and tools to assess how students are using language and literacy in order to plan their next steps. Perhaps the most important tool is the ability to design RLEs that allow you to observe and note how students are enacting the four ELA practices. Within the framework, two useful tools in observing and analyzing student learning are "Interrelated Dimensions of Learning Growth" (see <https://app.mapleforem.ca/en/groups/229/wiki/pages/2205>) and the

graphics that show how to enact the four ELA practices for each grade band (see <https://app.mapleforem.ca/en/groups/229/wiki/pages/1622#enactinggradebands>). These will help you unpack and reflect on your students' strengths, challenges, and next steps.

As you design your RLE with students and observe them as they enact the four ELA practices, consider using these guiding questions:

### Guiding Questions for Designing RLEs

Language as Sense Making	Language as System	Language as Exploration and Design	Language as Power Agency
How do learners understand what they hear, read, and view?	How do learners use what they know about how language works to read, write, represent, listen, speak, and view?	How do learners use texts to inform themselves about topics?	How does what learners hear, read, and view influence what they think?
How do learners communicate to others when they write, represent, and speak?		How do learners use language to create new ideas, solve problems, extend their knowledge, and communicate those ideas?	How do learners decide what and whose stories to tell?
			How do learners use language to influence others when they write, represent, and speak?

Note: *The four ELA practices are interrelated and interconnected.*

### How can you support your students' next steps?

There isn't a straight path forward or a language and literacy checklist to support every child in the same way. You need to continue to make decisions based on each child's whole literate self, their learning context, and the *ELA Curriculum Framework*.

When you notice significant language and literacy challenges, it is even more important to plan opportunities to use language within RLEs. Challenges in one area of language and literacy do not necessarily equate to challenges across all areas. For example, a child may have difficulty expressing their ideas through writing, but they may verbally articulate those ideas well as they explore complex issues and ideas with their peers.

Regardless of the specific learning needs of each child (recovery or otherwise), what's important is that targeted instruction is done in the context of the "whole game" of language and literacy. This means your students have a real chance to "play the whole game" rather than use discreet skills "on the sidelines" in isolation. Find teachable moments within your RLE for targeted instruction and intentionally provide students with many opportunities to think deeper using authentic texts.

### 3. Model flexible strategies and resources for using language and literacy

In preparation for the possible need to shift between in-person, blended, and remote learning contexts, model and use flexible literacy and learning strategies early in the school year. This will allow your students to become familiar with the strategies, technologies, and resources that they will be using.

Taking an inquiry stance allows you and your students the flexibility to co-design teaching and learning that empowers them with choice and voice in the strategies and resources they use. Whether your students are in class or learning remotely, they require a variety of thinking strategies and discussion protocols for collaboration within and across disciplines. How you decide on these strategies will depend on your students, the context, the purpose, and how the strategies align with the *ELA Curriculum Framework*. Possible starting place for inspiration are the Design Supports page and Project Zero's *Thinking Routine Toolbox* at [www.pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines).

### 4. Use multiple forms of texts purposefully

The kinds of texts you choose and how you use them in ELA directly affects your students' levels of engagement and their overall literacy experiences. Empowering your students to make choices when selecting texts for various purposes increases self-regulation, agency, and problem solving, and builds lifelong literacy competencies. This is especially important now as you face the challenges of ensuring safety, accessibility, and equity for your students.

Given the pandemic and the digital world we live in, educators are being required to rapidly reconsider their use of texts. Using only printed books or pen-to-paper writing does not acknowledge all the ways your students make sense of the world nor the unique ways they process and create information. For literacy to be both relevant and inclusive, your students need opportunities to engage with *oral, print, digital, physical, gestural, spatial, and various combinations of texts*. Multimodal texts provide your students with many ways to connect to their different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, as they make sense and create new ideas.

However, simply using multiple forms of texts is not enough for students to learn to use them with purpose. For example, many students prefer engaging with digital texts that are often easy to access, share, and read quickly. However, they tend to skim and scan these texts rather than read them deeply. Model literacy strategies that require dialogue and deep thinking—both internal or with peers—to help your students unpack texts for deep, meaningful purposes.

As you design RLEs, stay up to date with the current public health guidelines and school division plans to remain informed of how students can safely handle classroom books, magazines, and other physical objects.

*"Empower students to own their learning experiences in ways that are authentic to their lives now and into the future."* – Chris Bronke

# Manitoba ELA and Literacy Supports

## The English Language Arts Curriculum Framework

Minor updates to *English Language Arts Curriculum Framework: A Living Document* were made in September 2020. These changes are also reflected in [The ELA Place](#) on Maple, along with information about the update. The updated framework can also be found on Manitoba Education's [English language arts website](#) at [www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela).

## *The ELA Place* on Maple

[The ELA Place](#) connects the *ELA Curriculum Framework* with wraparound supports for planning instruction and professional learning. New features include the following:

- **Highlight Us!**  
This interactive Padlet on the home page, organized by topics of high interest, is a way for everyone to share links, files, photos, and other resources. Current highlights include sharing supports for strengthening our learning communities, using multiple forms of texts, in-class physically distanced learning, blended learning, online learning, and remote professional learning. As people contribute, these highlights will continue to evolve.
- **Experience Me!**  
These are professional learning experiences embedded throughout *The ELA Place* with the relevant areas of the framework.
- **The Educator, School, and Divisional Growth and Progress page**  
Found within "Reflecting on Learning Growth and Progress," this page now includes "Deepening Professional Competencies," the "Sustained Deeper Learning Model," and "Cohort Experiences."
- **Reflective Questions**  
Found throughout *The ELA Place*, the questions now take into consideration in-class, blended, and remote learning scenarios.

## ELA and Literacy Webinar Series

The first session of the Supporting ELA and Literacy webinar will go live on *The ELA Place* in September. All members of [The ELA Place](#) will be notified when it is posted. It will highlight ELA and literacy supports, and initiate conversations around ELA and literacy in the time of COVID-19.

## References

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