

100 Minutes

Making Every Minute Count in the Literacy Block

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Introduction

This book is by far the most comprehensive look at literacy and learning that I have ever ventured to write. In the past, I have taken isolated elements of literacy and examined them in a detailed and thorough manner. However, the question I get asked the most frequently is this: “How do you fit it all in?”

When we begin to examine literacy, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the number of skills, strategies, and elements that fit under the umbrella of the term. In a regular instructional day, a typical literacy block contains approximately 100 minutes. But what exactly do we need to fit into that time? When we think of balanced literacy or comprehensive literacy, we think of all elements of literacy learning, including reading, writing, oral communication, and media literacy. But it goes well beyond these four subject areas.

Balanced literacy has referred to the use of the gradual release of responsibility in the teaching–learning cycle, including modelled reading, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modelled writing, guided writing, independent writing, and writing workshops. However, in order to truly balance literacy, we have to include much more than the basics of this teaching–learning cycle. Balancing literacy asks us to

- provide opportunities for students to think, talk, and share
- conference with small groups of students and individuals
- plan time for students to examine exemplars and model texts in order to create success criteria
- have students provide and receive feedback with their peers and teacher
- build in rich tasks, higher-order thinking, open-ended questions, and collaborative learning opportunities
- integrate technology by teaching students to analyze and create media works, and to think critically and analytically about the texts they encounter
- provide opportunities for students to have choice and voice in their learning, to capitalize on their own strengths, to identify areas for growth and set personal learning goals
- differentiate to ensure that all students are demonstrating their learning in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them
- integrate learning from other subject areas and find texts that students can connect to
- teach students to write in a variety of text forms, including fiction and nonfiction; to write for a variety of purposes and audiences; and to read and think critically
- encourage students to write with voice and passion

- use ongoing assessment to monitor and evaluate students' learning, and to guide our instruction
- accommodate students with different learning styles and modify for students with differing abilities
- foster a love for learning

It's no wonder that the challenge of "balancing the literacies" seems completely overwhelming—not to mention the reality of fitting it all into a limited amount of allotted literacy time.

Although literacy blocks can differ in length, it is possible to fit all of these important aspects into a 100-minute block. By chunking a literacy block into three distinct sections, it is possible to provide opportunities for students to engage in all aspects of literacy every week. With this model, it is possible to provide daily explicit instruction in both reading and writing, and to meet with every student on a regular basis for guided reading and writing conferences. It is possible to integrate technology, promote higher-order thinking, and engage students in their learning through tasks that provide choices. It is possible to form meaningful connections between the work that students are doing independently and the learning that is happening in other areas of literacy instruction. It is possible to build assessment right into the literacy block so that students receive immediate purposeful feedback. It is possible to do all of this, and keep your sanity...I promise!

PART ONE

Finding the Balance

True Confessions of How I Spent My First 100 Minutes

I remember when I first began teaching 15 years ago. I sat every night staring at the vast chunk of time that was scheduled in my daybook for Language Arts: 100 minutes a day. That was 500 minutes a week, a total of 8 hours and 20 minutes of language instruction weekly. It was an immense chunk of time! Every night, I pored over the resources I had available to me. I had to find ways to fill that time. I knew that students needed to read, write, spell, and learn grammar. Those were the basics, the fundamentals I knew about at the time. I filled hour after hour, day after day, with reading activities, worksheets, independent writing, and spelling units. I knew that the writing process had multiple steps (pre-writing, drafting, writing, editing, and publishing), although I was unsure about how to help each child at each stage; I was always overwhelmed with the line that formed at my desk on the days students were editing their rough copies. I believed that everything students wrote needed to go through the whole writing process; therefore my students spent hours rewriting second drafts and final copies of their work.

As for reading, we read together. We read stories as a class, each child taking a turn to read out loud. I asked them simple questions and they answered them. In my classroom, we had a rule: One person speaks at a time. That was a sign of respect. The students followed along and responded by raising their hands. I even remember saying, “How can you learn if you’re talking?” After reading, students would complete page after page of comprehension questions. I knew that I needed to monitor their comprehension but, to be honest, I didn’t know what that truly was, let alone how to monitor it.

We had a spelling routine: every Monday I did a pre-test and every Friday we had the spelling test. Even then, I had the beginnings of understanding of the importance of diagnostic assessment; however, I wasn’t sure what to do with the kids who already knew all the words so, in a feeble attempt at differentiation, those students were responsible for the regular spelling list as well as the “enrichment words.” Only the students who had perfect spelling (or close to that) were rewarded with the prize of getting additional work. I thought that was what it meant to cater to the needs of all students.

Day after day, I filled my 100 minutes with reading, writing, spelling, and grammar work. Gradually, the busy routines of my language program seemed to fill the time. In fact, I was so successful filling the 100-minute literacy block that I found it difficult to always find time to read aloud to my students—a promise I made them at the beginning of every year. Although I didn’t truly understand the importance of reading aloud, I knew it was something we all enjoyed, and it was good for 15 to 20 minutes of time a day.

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The Foundation of Independence

The cornerstone to an effective literacy block is structuring opportunities for small-group instruction. Through these focused groups, teachers can explicitly teach, guide, monitor, observe, and assess individual students' progress. Guided-reading groups provide the opportunity for teachers to listen to students read individually, engage in rich conversations about their thinking about different texts, evaluate students' comprehension, monitor their fluency, strengthen their expression, and more. Similarly, meeting with small groups of students to share and discuss their writing provides opportunities for students to listen to the work of others, receive feedback from each other and the teacher, and set individual writing goals. Through frequent ongoing small-group meetings, the teacher is able to constantly assess each student's learning as well as immediately identify gaps or areas for further growth and development. But, how is it possible for the teacher to meet with students in these small groups for focused instruction? What are the other students in the class doing, while these learning conferences are going on? How can we find time to meet with every student to discuss their reading and writing?

The key to successful small-group instruction is independence, and it begins in the first few days of school. It is within these initial weeks that students need to begin to develop solid routines that foster independence. Beginning the school year by introducing students to two crucial elements of the literacy block—*independent reading and independent writing*—sets the foundation for a thriving learning environment. By strategically teaching students the different elements of the literacy block, it is possible to develop strong learning routines that continue to evolve and thrive throughout the school year.

What Is AWARD Time?

The thing that separates AWARD Time from other models of literacy instruction is the intentionality with which students' independent work is connected to the learning that is happening during other times during the literacy block. Students take time to work on reading responses directly following guided reading; this allows them time to immediately apply and practice the lessons they have just learned. Similarly, students meet for writing conferences directly after their writing time in order for them to share their work with the teacher and their peers and to receive immediate feedback. As students rotate through the different elements of AWARD Time, they move from guided instruction to independent practice and back to guided instruction in a simple, seamless fashion.