

# Understanding Disciplinary Literacy



An introduction



**Greenshaw**  
Research School

# Understanding Disciplinary Literacy



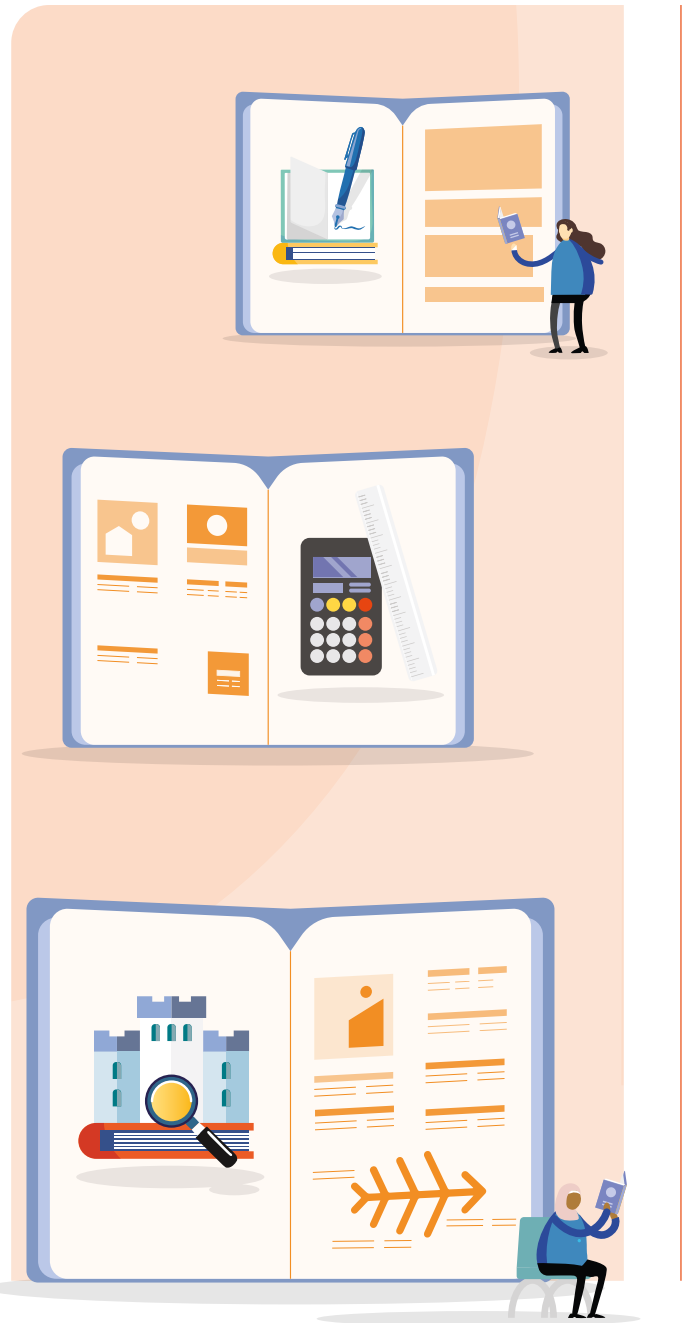
## What is Disciplinary Literacy?

Disciplinary Literacy is an approach advocated to improve pupils' literacy for some time now by various academics (for example, Moje, 2008<sup>1</sup>, Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012<sup>2</sup>). It recognises that other approaches used in education to improve children's literacy have not necessarily worked, and that other strategies are therefore required. (Fang, 2024<sup>3</sup>)

In the EEF's *Improving Secondary Literacy Guidance Report*, it is Recommendation One:

It recognises literacy skills are both general and subject specific, emphasising the value of supporting teachers of every subject to teach students how to read, write, and communicate effectively.

For this reason, schools should get greater buy-in from subjects that historically may not have seen teaching literacy as part of their remit. It supports the idea that disciplinary literacy does not seek to revolutionise literacy approaches, nor is it a drive for schools to make wholesale changes.



1. Moje (2008) *Foregrounding the Disciplines in Secondary Literacy Teaching and Learning: A Call for Change*
2. Shanahan & Shanahan (2012) *What is Disciplinary Literacy and Why Does it Matter*
3. Fang (2024) *Demystifying Academic Reading*



## How does Disciplinary Literacy differ from Content Area Literacy?

Many schools now use curriculum booklets to improve literacy by exposing pupils to more complex academic texts and less frequent vocabulary, and to develop their subject knowledge. This important practice is a part of *content area literacy*. Its differences to *disciplinary literacy* can be summarised in the table:

Disciplinary literacy aims to develop subject knowledge and bring pupils into the construction of texts in the disciplines, and the habits of thinking. Since different disciplines are founded on different research methods, aims and values, the way they're communicated also differs. A disciplinary approach to literacy therefore requires subject expertise.

Content Area Literacy	Disciplinary Literacy
Recognises that disciplines differ in content and emphasises building content knowledge	Also recognises that disciplines differ in the ways content is produced, communicated and consumed, and emphasises building an understanding of this
Views reading/writing as tools to improve learning from texts	Views reading/writing as tools and an integral part of communication in disciplines
Believes the skills and strategies of reading texts are the same across disciplines	Believes each discipline has its own ways of generating and structuring texts, evaluating, teaching & learning knowledge
Focuses on outcomes such as summarising, learning academic vocabulary, inferring, asking questions, making comparisons	Focuses on outcomes such as learning core concepts, big ideas, essential practices of the discipline, unifying themes, habits of mind

*Adapted from Fang (2024), p31*



## Why should we teach Disciplinary Literacy?

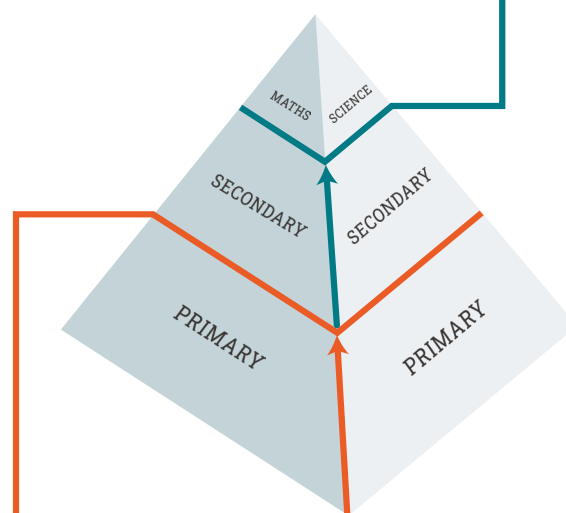
As pupils advance through their education, they encounter a greater volume of, and increasingly complex, academic texts. We expect more from them in terms of their knowledge, communication of ideas, and reading skills. By the time pupils reach A-level, there's a heavy demand on their subject knowledge, understanding of practices and thinking in a subject, and their ability to write highly detailed and sophisticated texts in timed conditions.

The pyramid model by Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) illustrates this increasing specialisation.

This greater challenge means pupils require a more in-depth knowledge, not just of content, but of the ways subjects communicate and the specific habits of thinking. This means teachers need to develop strategies for pupils to cope with such demands, as well as build pupils' understanding of language within subjects.

Scholar Judith Langer (2011)<sup>4</sup> believes that developing a disciplinary approach with pupils *'fosters a sense of belonging within a discipline and contributes to the confidence a learner needs in order to explore and question ideas that go beyond the given'*. It also builds deep content knowledge, helps pupils make connections across subjects, and challenge texts.

*Disciplinary Literacy*: subjects think and communicate in specialised ways, so texts are structured and use language uniquely



*Content Area Literacy*: subjects have different bodies of knowledge and vocabularies

4. Langer (2011) *Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction*, p3

We have produced subject-specific resources on Disciplinary Literacy in Maths, History and English Literature – Poetry. We hope you find these helpful and we look to add more guides in the future. Contact us on [research@greenshawhigh.co.uk](mailto:research@greenshawhigh.co.uk) to find out more.