



# Advanced Literacies Instruction: Spotlight on Instructional Units of Study

Produced for the New York State Education Department by  
Nonie K. Lesaux, PhD & Emily Phillips Galloway, EdD

## Why is this important?

Effective literacy instruction situates explicit instruction of crucial component skills (phonics, fluency, and word reading skills) within a more expansive framework—one that brings the world to students in meaningful ways and supports them as they develop the foundation they need to access and comprehend a range of texts. This **knowledge-building approach** is guided by the notion that learning big ideas and answering complex questions *also means* learning the language used to represent them. Emblematic of this knowledge-building approach is the use of **instructional units of study**.

Instructional units of study as a key mechanism for creating the conditions for knowledge-building literacy instruction are successful when they exemplify three characteristics. The first, **(1) depth of learning**, is achieved in units of study by placing a concept, word, or theme at the center of the instructional design for the purpose of building up content and world knowledge and critical thinking skills, ultimately setting up learners to comprehend, discuss, and compose sophisticated texts. The second characteristic, **(2) a focus on the learning process**, is achieved in units of study by moving away from mastery and highlights the learning process; instead of pushing students to master words or subject matter through memorization or lockstep procedures, a knowledge-building

### DEPTH OF LEARNING

Place a concept, word, or theme at the center to deepen understanding.

### LEARNING AS A PROCESS

Facilitate learning such that students can grapple with ideas and learn from mistakes.

### INTERACTIVE LEARNING

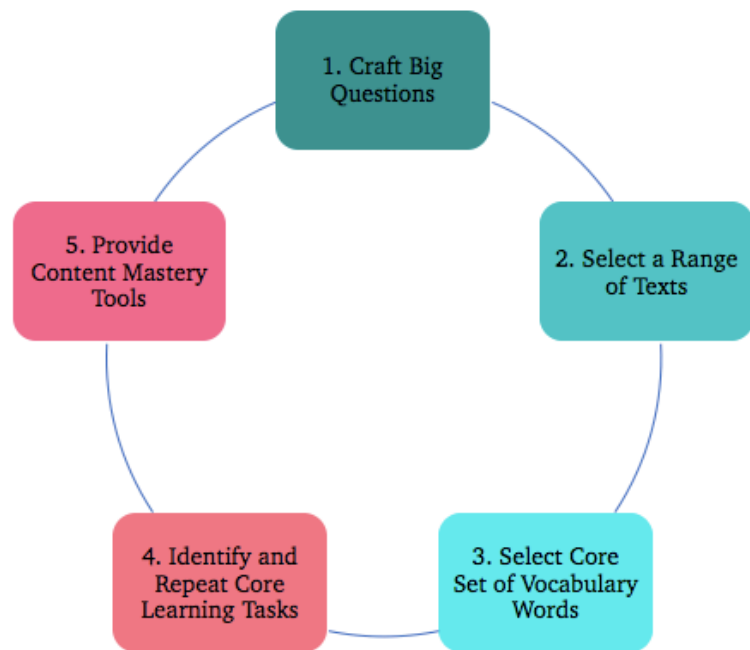
Support meaningful interactions among teachers and peers.

approach focuses on grappling with ideas, reconciling inconsistencies, arriving at conclusions, and making (and learning from) mistakes. The third characteristic of meaningful units of study is that they **(3) make learning interactive**. When adults initiate supportive interactions, and when children interact with one another, unfamiliar words and content become more meaningful and are more likely to be internalized.

## Making Instructional Units of Study Happen

### Organizing Lessons within a Knowledge-Building Cycle

Within any instructional unit, it is important to design an instructional cycle that is organized around one big idea and corresponding touchstone text (a conceptually rich, accessible, and engaging text that features the big idea), as well as a set of high-utility academic words. In this brief, we focus on the design of the knowledge-building cycle—which focuses on the use of a regular, repeated lesson sequence, providing an architecture for literacy instruction. There are five key features of this instructional cycle:



#### 1. Craft ‘Big’ Questions and Subquestions to Motivate the Unit’s Inquiry

Across an instructional unit, students must be motivated to engage with each text and learning task, that together lead to content mastery and literacy and language learning. A central method for motivating this inquiry is to engage students in answering a question that is authentic and for which there is no single answer (e.g., will brain science change criminal law? how will wearable technology change our society? is internet/technology access a civil right? should parents be held responsible when children smoke? should people be able to rent pets?). In addition to a big question, additional subquestions that guide the reading of each text and which can be answered using the information contained in that text serves to signal to students that learning is the product of integrating information and perspectives across texts.

#### 2. Select a Range of Texts

Selecting a range of text implies selecting texts that differ by modality (spoken, written and digital), that are of various text types or genres (descriptive, narrative, expository and argumentative), and that represent a range of perspectives and authors from different historical periods, cultures, and belief systems. It is through using a range of texts and working to integrate the information and perspectives across texts that supports deep learning of content as well as fosters familiarity with the language of text and the unique organizational structure of each text type.

### **3. Select a Core Set of Academic Vocabulary Terms to Teach Across the Unit**

Choosing a small set of academic vocabulary words to teach that are present in the unit's texts OR can be used to discuss the unit's topic supports students to acquire academic language as they master content. As part of the unit, we should select a small set of academic vocabulary words to teach. Indeed, the words under study should serve a series of functions: aid students in understanding the text in which the words appear, learn and talk about the unit's theme, and comprehend material across the unit.

### **4. Identify and Repeat Core Learning Tasks from Unit-to-Unit**

Identify a core set of structures and routines—the learning tasks—that make the learning process familiar and predictable to free up cognitive space and energy to focus on the content. That is, core sets of learning tasks should recur from cycle-to-cycle, to enable students to gain familiarity and ease with expectations. Interactive core learning tasks, such as think-pair-share, interactive crossword puzzles, and paired discussion activities can add depth to the areas where students need intensive learning opportunities. In addition protocols that structure participation in academic talk aid students in expressing their developing understandings and knowledge gained through a unit (e.g. academic conversations, accountable talk).

### **5. Provide Instructional Tools that Aid Content Mastery and Support Academic Language Production**

#### **Using Home Language Resources**

English Language Learners and Multilingual Learners bring knowledge of words (and their concepts) acquired in a home language to the classroom. The task for educators is to use instructional strategies and supports to help students establish connections between this knowledge and their developing knowledge in an additional language. In designing learning and teaching to support ELLs/MLLs, it is crucial to consider that word knowledge develops for students as they connect what they know about a word, in any language, with new information being taught.

**Quick Tip:** Allow students to use home language resources as they are learning an additional language. If educators are not speakers of students' home languages, they can make students the experts by having them share the connections they are establishing across languages.

Venn diagrams, story maps, cause-and-effect charts, mind maps and the like have become as commonplace and valued classrooms serving students at all age groups—and for good reason. These graphic organizers provide a visual, prearranged framework for students to get their ideas on the page and to link these ideas in ways that will ultimately line up with genre and audience expectations<sup>1</sup>. Long a mainstay in classrooms serving ELLs/MLLs, sentence starters (e.g., “I learned \_\_\_\_\_”) and sentence frames (e.g., “I think \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”) support ELLs, MLLs, and their classmates to take their ideas and put them into academic forms<sup>2</sup>.

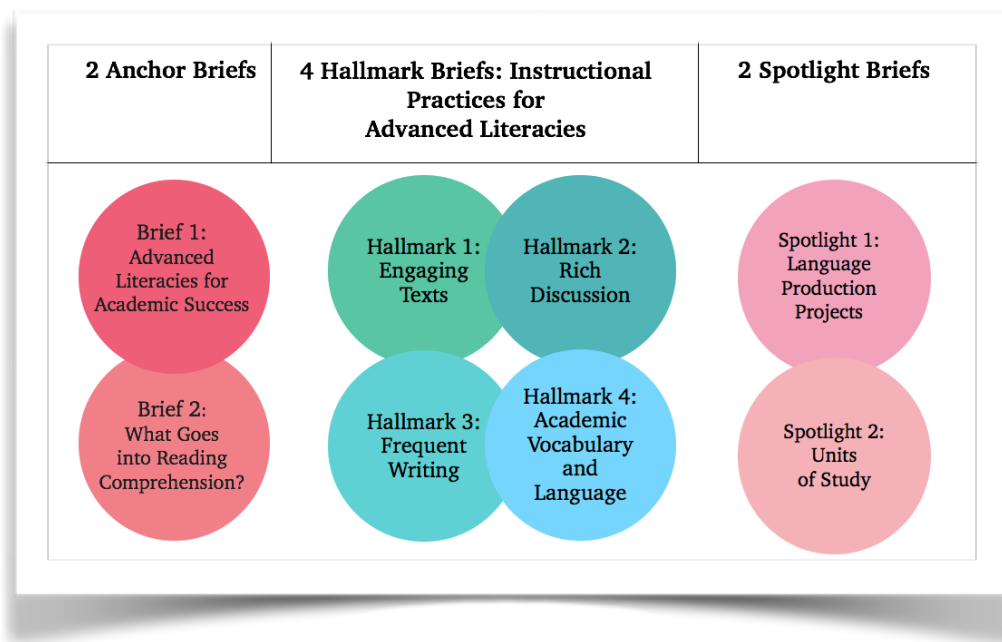
Sentence starters and frames can be designed to support students to:

- ▶ write or talk about particular content or texts
- ▶ craft different parts of a paragraph, such as a topic or concluding sentence
- ▶ use the unit’s target academic words accurately
- ▶ communicate for different purposes (e.g., rebuttal during debate vs. starting a conversation)
- ▶ use connectives to link ideas together.

Often, sentence starters and frames support the use of connectives. Supporting ELLs’ and MLLs’ use of connectives will often take the form of sentence starters and frames that integrate these linguistic signposts. For example, when comparing and contrasting the perspectives of an argument, sentence starters might include: “On one hand, \_\_\_\_\_. However, \_\_\_\_\_.”

## A Map of this Brief Series

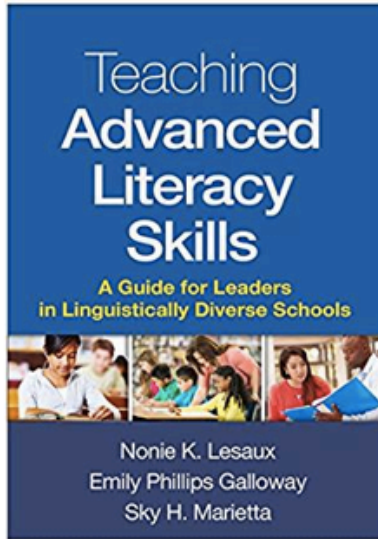
This is Spotlight 2 in a series of briefs designed to aid New York State educators in implementing the revised standards, particularly in settings serving linguistically diverse learners. This series includes:



<sup>1</sup> Harris, K.R., S. Graham, S., and L.H. Mason. 2006. “Improving the Writing, Knowledge, and Motivation of Struggling Young Writers: Effects of Self-Regulated Strategy Development with and Without Peer Support.” *American Educational Research Journal* 43 (2): 295-340.; Lesaux, N.K. 2010. *Turning the Page: Refocusing Massachusetts for Reading Success*. Boston: Strategies for Children.

<sup>2</sup> Kim, J., Olson, C., Scarcella, R., Kramer, J., Pearson, M., Van Dyk, D., and Land, R. (2011). A Randomized Experiment of a Cognitive Strategies Approach to Text-Based Analytical Writing for Mainstreamed Latino English Language Learners in Grades 6 to 12. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 4(3), 231-263.

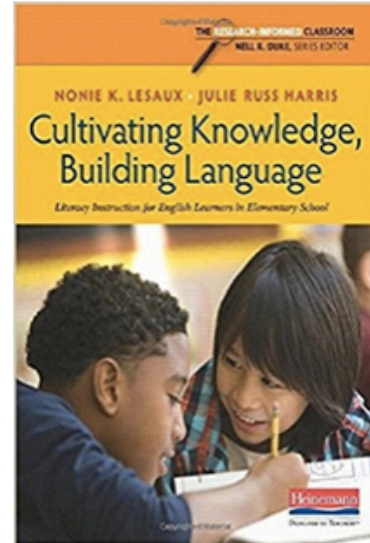
**For more on this, see...**



Language Diversity &  
Literacy Development  
RESEARCH GROUP

The **Lead for Literacy** initiative is a series of one-page memos that revisits assumptions that guide current policies and practices, outlines common pitfalls, and presents feasible solutions to pressing issues.

Access these briefs at <https://langlit.gse.harvard.edu/lead-for-literacy>



## **Office of Bilingual Education and World Languages:**

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## **NYS Next Generation P-12 Learning Standards:**

**Visit:** <http://www.nysed.gov/aimhighny>