

Structured Literacy Defined: An Explanation and Rationale

In 2024, The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) convened a working group to clarify and communicate what is meant by **Structured Literacy**, a term coined by IDA in 2014.

In this fact sheet you will find IDA's working definition as of July 2024, which will be updated as needed, along with the rationales for the specific wording in the definition. Both have implications for those using the term Structured Literacy to describe their instructional approaches.

First, here is the definition in its entirety.

In brief, Structured Literacy is a comprehensive, integrated approach to reading and writing instruction that directly and systematically builds on and develops oral language while explicitly teaching the structure of written language. Using this evidence-based approach, educators integrate the teaching of the foundational and higher-order skills and knowledge needed to develop proficient reading comprehension and written expression.

Going deeper, Structured Literacy is an instructional approach, not a program. However, to deliver this comprehensive instruction, educators often systematically integrate one or more programs. Using this approach, educators teach and develop the domains of oral language (i.e., phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics) and their representation in written language (i.e., orthography). With explicit, diagnostic, data-driven teaching, followed by sufficient practice, students develop the knowledge, skills, and fluency needed for proficient reading and writing.

The dynamic interplay between Structured Literacy's integrated content (WHAT is taught) and its powerful teaching principles (HOW content is taught) benefits all students, including advanced and linguistically diverse learners. Structured Literacy instruction is, however, essential for those who need extra support as they learn to read and write.

IDA had several goals in releasing this definition: we wanted to not only provide a short "elevator-speech" overview of what defines Structured Literacy (SL) but also give enough detail to differentiate SL from other approaches that lack scientific support. This is why we ended up with a short first paragraph followed by more detail.

The first sentence provides a very basic description of SL.

In brief, Structured Literacy is a comprehensive, integrated approach to reading and writing instruction that directly and systematically builds on and develops oral language while explicitly teaching the structure of written language.

We emphasize the concept of integration throughout the definition of SL, because the various components of SL should not be taught in isolation. Word reading skills, comprehension, spelling, and compositional writing should be taught in a cohesive fashion and with a recognition of how they relate to one another. Educators first learning the importance of SL teaching often notice the specifics—lists and descriptions of important components and concepts for effective literacy teaching—and sometimes assume they should teach these elements separately, as individual instructional blocks. This type of isolated instruction is not SL teaching. As you read further in the definition, note that we go on to use the word “integrate” or “integrated” two more times. Integration of all aspects of literacy is fundamental to SL teaching.

The word **comprehensive** also appears in this first sentence, and this term applies to several aspects of SL teaching. Right away, we point out that SL teaches reading and writing together—essential because of the reciprocal relationship between them. Next, we add that SL builds on and develops **oral language** (particularly important for multilingual learners), and teaches the **structures of the English orthographic system**—written language—and its relationship to oral language. Our use of the word comprehensive is meant to acknowledge that, although we are not detailing out every component, we recognize the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills that students need to develop for literacy.

Using this evidence-based approach, educators integrate the teaching of the foundational and higher order skills and knowledge needed to develop proficient reading comprehension and written expression.

In this second sentence, we define Structured Literacy as **evidence-based**. SL is built on and grounded in the knowledge gained from decades of research into a number of topics related to literacy and its acquisition.¹ The term “science of reading” is sometimes used when talking about evidence-based teaching: “Structured Literacy” refers specifically to instructional approaches backed by decades of research science².

We also continue to emphasize the comprehensive, integrated nature of SL teaching when we say **foundational and higher-order skills and knowledge**. All must be integrated, with the goal of helping students move toward proficient reading comprehension and written expression.

These first two sentences form a core definition of Structured Literacy that can be used when needed. What follows is more detail to expand on the first part of the definition. We hope that, whenever possible, the remainder of the expanded definition will be included in citations or references to SL.

Here’s what comes next.

Going deeper, Structured Literacy is an instructional approach, not a program. However, to deliver this comprehensive instruction, educators often systematically integrate one or more programs.

¹Areas of research within the “science of reading” include these and others: how students learn to read and write, why some students need extra support, and approaches to teaching literacy that have achieved the best outcomes—including for emergent bilingual students.

²See [Science of Reading: Defining Guide](#) for more information on the science of reading.

We refer to SL as a single instructional **approach** but in fact there are a number of variations—many slightly differing approaches—that fall under the umbrella of SL teaching. We also point out here that SL is not a program, but teachers may integrate a combination of programs to build an effective SL curriculum.

However, IDA recognizes that the foundation of effective teaching is teacher knowledge, and IDA’s [Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading \(KPS\)](#)³ and ongoing teacher training initiatives help teachers develop the skills needed for effective SL teaching with or without a specific program.

Finally, we describe the delivery of SL as **systematic** and **integrated**. Once again, we emphasize the importance of integration of instruction and we use the term *systematic* to mean that there is a planned sequence of instruction, with thought given to the order of introduction of skills and knowledge to avoid confusion and support student success. However, *systematic* instruction does not imply that there is only one sequence of instruction that is appropriate. In fact, ideally the sequence will be adapted to the needs of the learner, while keeping in mind that assessment should not lead to a random introduction of skills that are not carefully integrated and sequenced. In SL teaching, teachers need to know how written and spoken language work and be intentional about the way they introduce skills and knowledge to learners.

Using this approach, educators teach and develop the domains of oral language (i.e., phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics) and their representation in written language (i.e., orthography).

Here we emphasize the importance of oral language as a foundation for SL teaching. Students who are native speakers of English come to school with some knowledge of the five domains of oral language (phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics) as they apply to conversational English, but these students will need to continue developing the knowledge needed for academic reading and writing.⁴(It’s important for educators to understand these five domains of language, and IDA provides information on each of them in the Structured Literacy Infomap⁵.) For multilingual learners, the systematic and explicit teaching of English should build on their knowledge of the five domains of oral language in their first language.

We also state that SL teaches the representation of the domains of oral language in written form. This might seem obvious, but it’s important to recognize that in order to develop literacy, students need to understand not only the connections between oral and written language but also the ways in which spoken and written language

³IDA's Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading can be found at <https://dyslexiaida.org/knowledge-and-practices/>. The Knowledge and Practice Standards explicitly sets forth the knowledge and skills that all teachers of reading are expected to possess to advance students' reading and writing profiles through a Structured Literacy approach in classroom, intervention, and clinical settings.

These standards reflect the current state of the scientific research base and are the result of a rigorous development and vetting process that included the input of a wide range of stakeholders, including researchers, educators, higher education faculty, clinical specialists, parents, and advocates.

⁴In addition, some students will need extra support with their oral language development.
⁵<https://shopida.org/collections/digital-downloads-upgraded/products/ida-structured-literacy-infomap> differ. SL teaches how the five domains of language are represented in writing, including the structures that form written words, phrases, sentences, and so on. We use the term **orthography** here to refer to the overall system of writing, rather than simply the conventions of spelling, as the term is sometimes used.

With explicit, diagnostic, and data-driven teaching, followed by sufficient practice, students develop the knowledge, skills, and fluency needed for proficient reading and writing.

Explicit instruction makes it clear to students what they need to know and be able to do. Explicit SL teaching does not leave students confused or floundering. Diagnostic teaching responds to the needs of the student, and in order to provide this type of instruction, data is essential in order to identify what students need to learn next and how to best support them in that learning. There are many forms of data—both formal and informal—that SL teachers will use to inform their instruction.

The word **fluency** is in the definition of SL because students need to develop a level of automaticity with the reading and writing process that frees them to think about what they are reading and what they want to say as they write. SL teaching provides sufficient practice to develop the automaticity and fluency that students need.

The dynamic interplay between Structured Literacy's integrated content (WHAT is taught) and its powerful teaching principles (HOW content is taught) benefits all students, including advanced and linguistically diverse learners.

Key components of SL teaching include what is taught and how the material is taught, and integration is emphasized here once again. For more detail on these components, see the [Structured Literacy Infomap](#).

We also point out that this type of teaching benefits all learners. For advanced students, a systematic, diagnostic, data-driven approach allows them to bypass material that they already know, progress efficiently through material that they are able to learn quickly, and move on to more advanced learning. Linguistically diverse students benefit from the same approach, which responds to their specific needs and supports their learning of both English and their home language.

Structured Literacy instruction is, however, essential for those who need extra support as they learn to read and write.

As the International Dyslexia Association, we never lose sight of the needs of students with dyslexia. We know that SL teaching benefits all students and has great impact for those who need extra support. The goal of Structured Literacy teaching is for all students to become successful readers and writers.

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