

Supporting English and Literacy for Secondary Students

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Learning during lockdown
Read, read, read!
Talk, talk, talk!
Write, write, write!



English is about communication in all forms: speaking and listening, reading and writing, viewing and representing. Most activities and experiences in lockdown are mediated by language – from talking via zoom or facetime with relatives, writing emails and snapchats, reading for pleasure and news, to watching streaming videos. Encouraging discussions about these and other activities in everyday life will support your child's literacy and learning for English.

How do I help my teenager with literacy?

Supporting well-being and learning

Routines that are sustaining and pleasurable are as important as those that keep young people focused on their school work. Young people are just as susceptible as adults to zoom fatigue. Some secondary schools have scheduled fortnightly 'Unplugged Fridays' with no new work set and no classes scheduled. Students can catch up, get individualised help, or have a complete break.

Many students will find working with paper and pen easier, so offer printouts of work if possible. Suggest that they take hand-written notes during their classes or when they are viewing online resources. Notetaking, lists, summarising, devising your own questions are all good literacy strategies for deepening learning in every subject.

Ask your child to share what they are doing in English assignments and online classes. Get to know the resources their teachers have provided to help them complete tasks. Your interest, encouragement and confidence in their capacities to meet the challenges will be incredibly helpful. Asking your child to identify what they know already, what are they not sure about, what they need to find out next helps keep the emphasis on them as learners.

Get in touch with the school for any support your child needs that you feel you cannot provide. Most schools offer one-on-one or small group online support through the COVID tutor program or their learning assistance program.

Social learning in English

In English, students learn through discussions, develop and test ideas with peers, and share drafts of their writing for feedback. It is unusual for your child to be working independently as much as they are during lockdown. Support them to work online with a friend on English tasks or collaborate on their own fun project, such as making a comic, a podcast, stop-animation, a dystopian novella, a joke collection, an advertising campaign. Encourage them to connect with elderly relatives or neighbours by recording an online or telephone interview to use as the basis for a story. These can be sources for creative projects and identifying authentic audiences.

Be there for them as a sounding board. Talking about their intentions for a piece of writing and its organisation can help your child clarify their ideas. Reading a draft out aloud to an interested listener, or listening to a recording, can help your child check the logic of an argument and how well their language is working. If they are writing argument, talk with them about counterarguments, or other evidence that might persuade an audience to a point of view. Feedback on what is working well, what might be better, and what might go next will help students move to their next draft.

Writing: Getting it right, making it better

The more young people write, the more they will improve their control and confidence. Your child may be scared of making mistakes in front of you and will not yet have mastered all elements of language. You could talk together as a household about writing and each set personal writing goals. Young people may not know that even for adults, writing is a complex task needing lots of decision-making about audience, purpose, form, word choice and sentence structure. They may not know about the messiness of first drafts. Encourage them to work through a writing process of planning, drafting, revising and editing. Online tools for refining writing can include the Editor function on the latest version of Word.

Help your child identify small achievable specific goals for their writing. For example, write one paragraph of an essay response, draft a descriptive opening for a story, compose a six-line poem, create a storyboard or design a colourful mind map for an extended writing task. Corrections to spelling and punctuation should happen in the final stages of the writing process and could be an attainable goal for a short session of work.

Reading in English

Texts are the heart of English. Your child will have texts to study including novels, short stories, poetry, plays, non-fiction, films and digital texts. You can support your child by reading or watching their set texts with them. Their teacher will have set activities for them to complete but most students will benefit from a discussion about the key issues in the text. Questions about texts in English often relate to the English Textual Concepts (e.g. context, perspective, and narrative) or language techniques. Reading Australia has learning activities designed by English teachers on hundreds of Australian texts. Check if the text your child is reading is there.



Reading for pleasure (and a good time to turn off the wi-fi)

Research shows that reading improves cognition, memory, vocabulary, writing skills and sleep. It can reduce stress, foster empathy and ease loneliness. Consider finding a regular short block of time for everyone in the household to 'drop everything and read'. Sit in the sun or designated reading corner. If you have younger children at home, you and your high school student could take turns to read aloud to them or record audio-visual readings (using a platform such as Flipgrid or Screencastify) to share outside your household. The Children's Book Council of Australia recently published their shortlists of books for early childhood, younger and older readers and announced their 2021 winners, with support materials also available on their website. They may be able to access these as ebooks through their public or school library. Older students might like to explore the international literature translations found in the online journal Words Without Borders.

Go outside for English

When possible, spending time outside is important for us all. Your child could read a book outside or read aloud to siblings on the balcony. This is crucial down time for young people but if they are bored or wanting stimulation, creative outdoor opportunities can be stimulating. When they go for a walk, they can write down everything they see in a writer's notebook or describe their backyard or view in detail. Alternatively, they could document their walk with photos and create an illustrated adventure story or shoot a short film. They might enjoy writing short poems, postcards or letters to drop into a neighbour or friend's letterbox. Even a poem they find online and print out will be a welcome find for someone close by.

Literacy resources

Free online digital games include those designed to improve typing such as TypeRacer or you could link social activism to literacy with vocabulary and grammar activities on the UN World Food Program's FreeRice. Sign up for a 'word of the day' app and challenge each other to use the word during the day. Offline activities could include your child making a crossword based on a novel or other text, re-writing a passage from an alternative point of view (e.g. switching from third to first person) or tense (e.g. swapping present tense for past), or defining new words and finding synonyms. Recreating or transforming texts into new forms can increase understanding, for example, writing a diary entry as a character, listing interview questions for a character, or turning a poem into a short story or picture book.

Engaging with the wider world of English

- August is Poetry Month and Red Room Poetry is running the 30x30 poetry competition with daily prompts for 3-line poems. Try them! The Projects page is a treasure trove of poems, including Poetry in First Languages, the In Your Hands poetry anthology and the Disappearing project. Enter the Poem Forest Competition (closing 17 September) to have a tree planted.
- The Poetry Foundation has many classic poems and the Poetry Archive features poets reading their poems aloud. Students might be inspired to create an anthology of their favourite poems, write their own poetry, or perform and record slam poetry. Blackout poetry or found poetry activities can be fun options for reluctant writers and artistic students.
- If you're a member of your local public library, you can access digital books, audio books and magazines online at Getting started with Libby . Check out the interactive resources on your child's My School Library (login via the student portal).
- The WestWords OFFICIAL YouTube channel features Poets' Corner, Zoom Slams, Writing Western Sydney: The Readings and a series of creative writing and illustrating workshops.
- For Campbelltown residents, WestWords' writing competition, the Fisher's Ghost Writing Prize is open to students and closes on 5th October 2021.
- Visit the Human Library and check out the humans available to 'borrow'. Students could write a Human Library entry for themselves or someone they admire.
- Sydney Theatre Company Virtual offers soliloquies, monologues, short performances and readings. Record your own performance to share with your family or friends. Short scenes from Shakespearean plays can be viewed at Bell Shakespeare.

Conclusion

Remember that English and literacy skills develop in all sorts of contexts. Encourage your child to engage with the resources that their school has created for them. Contact the school if they need help. If your child has finished their set work, let them explore the myriad creative opportunities that can engage them in using language for real purposes and audiences.

**For further advice or assistance email:
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