

# The Language Arts



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The six language arts, as designated by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) (Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996), are listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing. The first four have traditionally been considered to be the language arts; however, since visual media have become more important in everyday life, viewing and visually representing have become more important as means of communicating.

## *The Language Arts*

- **Listening:** understanding spoken language
- **Speaking:** communicating ideas through oral language
- **Reading:** understanding written language
- **Writing:** communicating through written language
- **Viewing:** understanding visual images and connecting them to accompanying spoken or written words
- **Visually Representing:** presenting information through images, either alone or along with spoken or written words

All meanings that are attached to the words that we use are obtained through experience. Infants begin experiencing the world as soon as they are born. From the beginning, they experience light and darkness, being held and fed, having their diapers changed, and many other things. These experiences are often accompanied by words spoken by people around them. The language arts are tied to experience through words and the images that words represent. Listening involves making connections between spoken words (abstract oral symbols) and their meanings. Speaking involves taking command of the words by using them orally to communicate with others. Reading involves translating written symbols into the oral symbols that they represent and, finally, into their meanings; and writing involves encoding written symbols so that they will convey information to others. Viewing involves interpreting the images for which words stand and connecting visual images in videos, computer programs, and websites with accompanying

printed or spoken words. Visually representing involves presenting information through still or motion pictures, either alone or accompanied by written or spoken words.

Although children come to school with a wide variety of background experiences, their experiences may or may not be applicable to the focus of the school. Some know the language of street corners and alleys but do not know the language required for school activities. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds may not have had experiences with computers or even such school supplies as pencils, scissors, and crayons and may not have traveled beyond their immediate neighborhoods. Such children are limited in their exposure to a variety of places, people, animals, and other things. Those children who have had varied experiences related to topics covered in the schools' curricula have enhanced comprehension of material that they listen to, read, and view and more relevant material to draw on when they speak, write, or prepare visual presentations.

Schoolchildren are developing all of their language skills simultaneously. Expanded classroom experiences enhance this development. Language skills also continue to be refined throughout life. Individuals continue to have experiences, to listen, to speak, to view, to read, to write, and to make visual presentations of various types. Their experiences provide them more opportunities to learn through listening and viewing; to use this learning by imitating in their own speech, writing, and visual presentations the things heard or seen; and to understand better the things that they read. The following is an example of the continuing refinement of language knowledge that occurs for people at all ages.

Bryan had never gone sailing until he was an adult. In the course of sailing with an experienced friend, Sean, Bryan for the first time used the sheet to raise the sail, placed the centerboard, used the rudder, and experienced running before the wind and tacking to sail upwind back to shore. Sean kept up a commentary on what was happening as it took place. Bryan listened to Sean's conversation, watched his actions, and used the context of the direct experience to give it meaning. Eventually he began to make comments of his own, sprinkling them with the newly learned terminology. Sean's responses clarified Bryan's understanding of the language of sailing even more. The next day Bryan wrote to his brother and described his sailing adventure. He used many terms in his letter that he had never used in writing before, at least not in that context. He even drew a diagram of a sailboat and labeled it to clarify his comments.

## **Listening**

The language art of listening begins developing at birth and provides the basis for development of speaking, reading, and writing skills. Listening can be defined as the interpretation of sounds that are heard. When a baby is first born, he immediately begins to receive sensory impressions, including hearing sounds. However, in this early stage, the sounds are merely received by the ears; they are not interpreted by the brain. As time passes and the child hears a particular sound, such as *milk*, which is accompanied by the presence of a particular substance, the child begins to associate the substance with the sound. This is the place where experience produces meanings for the child. When a mere mention of the word *milk* by another person excites the child, he is probably interpreting the sounds. At that time, listening has taken place.

Young children learn much language by listening to those around them. They listen not only to spoken words but also to the rhythms and intonation patterns of the language that they hear. They take the language they hear and make generalizations based on it. For example, they may generalize about how adjectives are changed to the comparative degree. They may say that something is &ldblq;gooder&rdblq; than something else, having applied the generalization to an irregular construction. Because they learn much through their listening and thinking behavior, children enter school when they are five or six years old able to converse with their teachers and their peers in understandable language.

It is possible to hear sounds and not listen to them. You have probably, at some time, been engrossed in an activity and not responded when a friend asked you a question. When the friend persisted by saying something such as &ldblq;Well, is it?&rdblq; you may have been able to reconstruct what you heard him say originally, interpret the sounds that you received, and respond to the question appropriately.

Children who are not hearing impaired come to school with a fairly long history of hearing, but their listening skills are not necessarily good. Children learn to &ldblq;tune out&rdblq; things around them that they do not choose to hear and, therefore, may need to be taught what things are important to listen to in school.

Listening is a skill that allows a person to receive oral information from others. It is therefore sometimes referred to as a receptive skill and as an oral language skill. Through it, a person can take in new ideas by decoding into meanings the oral symbols (words, phrases, and sentences) that make up the communication.

Listening is often not given adequate attention in the classroom, partially because some people seem to equate listening and hearing.

## **Speaking**

Speaking is making use of vocal sounds to communicate meaning to others. The newborn baby comes into the world making a variety of sounds. These sounds, however, are not produced in an overt effort on the part of the child to convey meaning in his early days. Except in the case of crying and whimpering, the child is simply producing random sounds of which his vocal mechanism is capable. Meaningful speech develops as children learn the effects of particular sounds on the people around them. When a child deliberately uses a word to communicate with others, speech has occurred. The child has attached meaning to the sounds that he makes, based on past experience.

Speaking is often referred to as an expressive skill and an oral language skill. The speaker encodes (represents in oral symbols, or words) a thought into an oral message and transmits this message to a listener, who must decode (translate into meaning) the oral symbols in order to understand the message. Speakers can transmit information about past and present circumstances, as well as about future events and abstract ideas.

## **Reading**

Reading is the interpretation of written symbols. It involves visual perception of the symbols, sometimes translation of the visual symbols into auditory ones, and the connection of meaning with these symbols. Although in later stages of reading readers may move directly from print to meaning, in the early stages children generally decode to sound and then associate the resulting oral words with their experiences with those words. If the reader has no experience to relate to the words in the text, the reader cannot construct meaning, and reading does not actually occur. For example, if a child sounds out the word walrus, the child can attach meaning to the word only if he has had experiences with walruses, through seeing them at a marine exhibit or reading about them and seeing their pictures. Understanding is a necessary part of the reading process.

Initial stages of learning to read generally follow those of learning to listen and learning to speak, and ideas understood in oral language form a basis for the understanding of ideas found in print. Learning to read is often associated with starting school, but many children come to school already reading to some extent. They often recognize common product names and signs found in their environments (although some of this recognition can be attributed to their facility in viewing), and some can read stories and other printed information.

Reading is a way of taking in information that has been recorded in print by another person. Thus, it is classified as a receptive skill and a written language skill. The reader decodes a written message that has been encoded by a writer and interprets that message in light of his or her own experiences. Information that was written today or many years ago may be read now or in the future, allowing readers to learn from the accumulated records of literate humankind.

Reading serves many functions for the reader. It provides information or entertainment. It offers challenges or relaxation. Each reading act may be for a slightly different purpose.

## **Writing**

Writing involves communicating with others through the printed word or recording ideas for yourself. It is classified as an expressive skill and a written language skill. The writer encodes a message that is decoded and interpreted by the reader. Learning to read often spurs the desire to learn to write, but reading and writing may be taught simultaneously.

A writer passes along experiences to a prospective reader through inscribed symbols that stand for these experiences. If the reader's experiences encompass the concepts expressed by the symbols or are sufficiently close to help the reader make new connections, communication occurs. If the writer and the reader do not have enough commonality of experience related to the written message, meaning is not likely to be transmitted.

Writing allows a person to communicate with others who are contemporaries or to leave records that may be read by succeeding generations. This ability to span time offers many possibilities to writers with varying purposes—transmission of instructions for performing tasks, preservation of

the folklore and customs of a people, entertainment of the reader, and persuasion of a reader to adopt a point of view, among many possibilities.

### **Viewing**

Viewing refers to interpreting visual media. These media include photographs, illustrations, graphs, maps, and diagrams found in books, as well as video presentations found on television, Internet sites, CD-ROMs, or DVD-ROMs. It can even include live performances in theaters and classrooms. Students today are inundated with visual media that are attempting to convey information to them, persuade them to do or believe something, or entertain them. The messages received from these media must be comprehended using the same thinking skills needed for comprehending print material that is read. Critical analysis of the material on the Internet is vital, as the Internet is used more and more as an information source for reports in classes and as more and more sites with unreliable information are added to reputable sites that also reside on the Internet.

### **Visually Representing**

Visually representing refers to communicating through visual images. These images include photographs, drawings, graphs, maps, and diagrams, as well as video presentations, dioramas, models, and dramatizations. This form of communication requires the student to collect and organize information, decide on the best way to convey it to others, and produce a visual product to accomplish this communication, often incorporating print and sound (including speech) with the visual images, if the student is trying to convey information or sway opinion. It requires organizing and representing an event or sequence of events for the pleasure or diversion of an audience, if the purpose of the representation is to entertain.

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