
“Content area literacy focuses on study skills that can be used to help students learn from subject matter specific texts. Disciplinary literacy, in contrast, is an emphasis on the knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use the knowledge within the disciplines.”

*Shanahan and Shanahan,
2012*

Disciplinary literacy. It seems to be one of the hot topics of 2017, and rightly so. It is also a common topic of confusion. What is disciplinary literacy? Disciplinary literacy is more than embedding content within your literacy program; it’s about helping students think about how information is created, shared and evaluated within the disciplines of science, math, and social studies.

Today, data, information, knowledge, and even understanding are a simple click away. We are able to learn about any topic we want through millions of different resources, any time we want, even at home- especially at home. However, transferring our knowledge to authentic situations and acting upon different contexts demand skills, that, while often modeled, are not always taught intentionally in schools. We need to extend and prioritize skills such as empathy, ethics, and courage to take action. Character and passion should be part of our intentional curriculum.

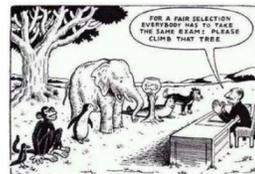
Where and How to Begin

Where do we start?

Modeling passion and concern for a cause will get you started. Students have an innate ability to be awe-struck through our own enthusiasm and emotions. Share current events, question the claims, and look at purpose and perspective through a topic they question and care about.

How do we start?

Books can provide your starting point. One of my favorite books to use as a mentor text is [Fish in a Tree](#) by Lynda Mullaly. This story speaks to anyone who’s ever felt that something was wrong with them. The protagonist, Ally, hides her inability to read until her teacher catches on and helps her not to be so hard on herself. Having dyslexia is nothing to be ashamed of, she just needs something different from other students in her class. Students of all ages worry about what’s fair and what’s not. While they easily get



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“Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

- Albert Einstein

the concept of equality, they don’t always understand the difference between equity and equality. This book will clearly exemplify the wise words of Albert Einstein, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its entire life believing it’s stupid.” Adding this quote to [illustrators’ visions](#), provides conversations for students to think about claims such as “All students must take this course to graduate”, “All children must be 15 years of age to get a driver’s permit”, or “All students must ride a bus to school.”

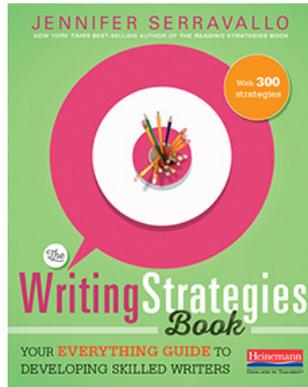
“Studies support the success of the literature based approach to literacy with many types of students.”

*Tunnell and Jacobs,
1989*

Claims such as these offer opportunities for students to question equality, equity, ethics, and empathy in authentic situations, relevant to their lives. Students will soon begin to develop their own claims within a subject they are passionate about and make connections to times when they felt they were not treated fairly.

Strategies That Work

To encourage students to take action, use Jennifer Serravallo’s [*The Writing Strategies Book*](#). This is filled with over 300 easy to implement strategies that can be used with any writing program, from Writing Workshop to the Daily 5. Using the “Wonder, ‘What If...?’” strategy, students can question, what if those claims were always held-fast? What if students didn’t all have to take the same classes to graduate? What if students could create a product to graduate? What if nobody needed a driver’s permit? These hypothetical situations help students see different perspectives, plan for a change, and note consequences.



Comprehension Toolkit

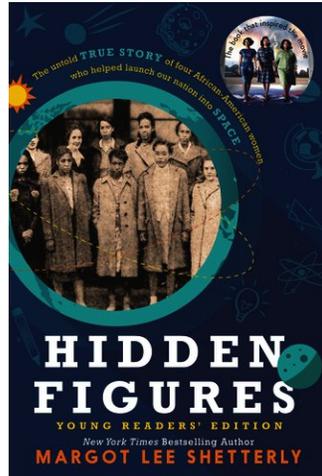
Another great resource to help students think across disciplines is Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis’ [*Content Literacy*](#) from their [*Comprehension Tool Kit*](#). The Tool Kit is an excellent supplementary resource to help support students in grades K-6 with inquiry through non-fiction texts. Lesson 9 in the intermediate book is all about taking action. Think Sheets, on page 107, help students identify issues by looking for the facts and connecting them with their knowledge and emotions. It offers opportunities for students to dive into inquiry, question what they find, and problem solve.



Books!

Books are the perfect way to encourage and teach transferable thinking, problem solving and communication skills. Below are some newer titles along with some ideas for bringing disciplinary literacy into your classroom.

[Hidden Figures](#) (Young Reader's Edition) Interest level grades 4-7



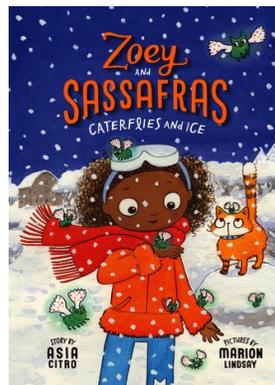
Now in a special new edition perfect for young readers, this is the amazing true story of four African-American female mathematicians at NASA who helped achieve some of the greatest moments in our space program. Before John Glenn orbited the earth or Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, a group of dedicated female mathematicians known as "human computers" used pencils, slide rules, and adding machines to calculate the numbers that would launch rockets and astronauts into space. This book brings to life the stories of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Christine Darden, four African-American women who lived through the Civil Rights era, the Space Race, the Cold War, and the movement for gender equality, and whose work forever changed the face of NASA and the country.

Idea for the classroom:

[View the movie's trailer](#) and ask student to

- Assess how the perspective of the movie director and the author differ
- Locate examples of injustice in the video clip and the book
- Connect the struggles presented in the clip and book to the struggles of injustice today

[Zoey and Sassafras: Caterflies and Ice](#) Interest Level grades 1-4



With magical animals, science, mystery and adventure, the series Zoey and Sassafras has something for everyone! Easy-to-read language and illustrations on nearly every page make this series perfect for a wide range of ages. In the fourth book, an unexpected snow storm causes trouble for the magical creatures of the forest. When Zoey and Sassafras attempt to rescue trapped caterfly eggs, they make a mistake. Can they figure out a way to fix things before the baby caterflies hatch?

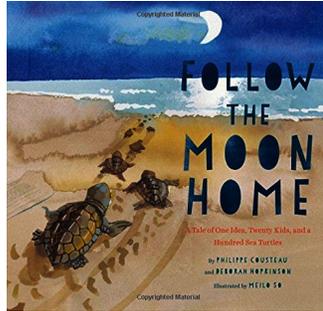
Ideas for the classroom:

- Let this narrative text be a mentor text for problem solving, the scientific method and growth mindset.
 - What is the problem?
 - How do they solve it?

- What steps do they take?
- What is growth mindset and how do you develop yours?
- Compare this book to other books in the series.
 - What stays constant?
 - What changes among the texts?
 - What are Zoey's values?

Follow the Moon Home: A Tale of One Idea, Twenty Kids, and a Hundred Sea Turtles

Interest Level grades K-3 (I think older students will love it, too!)



Acclaimed activist Philippe Cousteau and renowned author Deborah Hopkinson team up to offer a story of the powerful difference young people can make in the world. Meet Viv, who has a new home and a new school by the sea, and follow her as she finds her way in a new place and helps bring together a whole community to save the sea turtles of the South Carolina coast.

Ideas for the Classroom:

This book is sure to motivate students to inquire about subjects that are of interest to them and to find a problem and offer solutions. It's perfect to use with all ages in a Researcher's Workshop (see chapter 14 in [Strategies That Work](#)). In addition to working through the inquiry process and synthesizing and evaluating resources, students become an expert in their topic and can excite the other students with their passion.

Show students an age-appropriate [video](#) of [baby sea turtles](#) going [towards the ocean](#).

- What problems do you anticipate for the baby turtles?
- Should people get involved in helping turtles get to the ocean?
- What other animals need help from humans?
- What would happen if people didn't help animals survive?
- What are some human behaviors that cause danger to animals?

As research shows again and again, choice is the number one motivator for students. Mentor texts, such as these, model how to think within a discipline. Offering books and resources for students to choose their own topics to research, care about, and problem solve is the optimal way for students to create meaning and purpose.

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Resources

- Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2012). What is disciplinary literacy and why does it matter?. *Topics in language disorders, 32*(1), 7-18.
- Tunnell, M. O., & Jacobs, J. S. (1989). Using "real" books: Research findings on literature based reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 42*(7), 470-477.
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