

Improving Adolescent Literacy Across Content Areas | Skinny PLC Packet

Leader Guide



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Leader Guide

Skinny Content Area Literacy Professional Learning Community

Grades 4–12 • ELA, Science, Social Studies • Florida Center for Reading Research with support from the Hardin Foundation

Welcome, School Leader

This guide provides the background, structure, implementation guidance, and key literacy practices that define this “Skinny” PLC. Your leadership is crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of these instructional strategies, which are grounded in evidence-based practices designed to improve literacy outcomes for adolescent learners.

★ Key Impact

Teachers will learn to embed discipline-specific literacy practices that help students comprehend complex academic texts and communicate understanding effectively.

How Schools Use This PLC

Most schools implement the PLC over the course of a semester through regularly scheduled PLC meetings. Each session introduces a literacy practice, allows teachers to experience the strategy as learners, and provides time for lesson planning and reflection.

Between sessions, teachers implement the strategies in their classrooms and bring examples and reflections back to the PLC for discussion.

Before the PLC Begins	During PLC Implementation
• Identify a facilitator (coach, lead teacher, or administrator) • Select participating teachers across content areas • Schedule PLC meetings across the semester • Provide access to PLC materials and videos	• Attend the opening PLC session to demonstrate support • Conduct brief classroom walkthroughs • Encourage teachers as they experiment with strategies

Why This PLC Matters

Despite improvements in early literacy instruction nationwide, many students in grades 4–12 still struggle to comprehend complex academic texts. Content area teachers are uniquely positioned to embed discipline-specific literacy practices into instruction to help students make sense of what they read and communicate their understanding effectively.

This PLC is built on the WWC Practice Guide: Improving Adolescent Literacy and includes classroom-based strategies focused on four research-based recommendations:

- 1 Explicit Vocabulary Instruction
- 2 Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction
- 3 Extended Discussion of Text Meaning
- 4 Student Motivation and Engagement

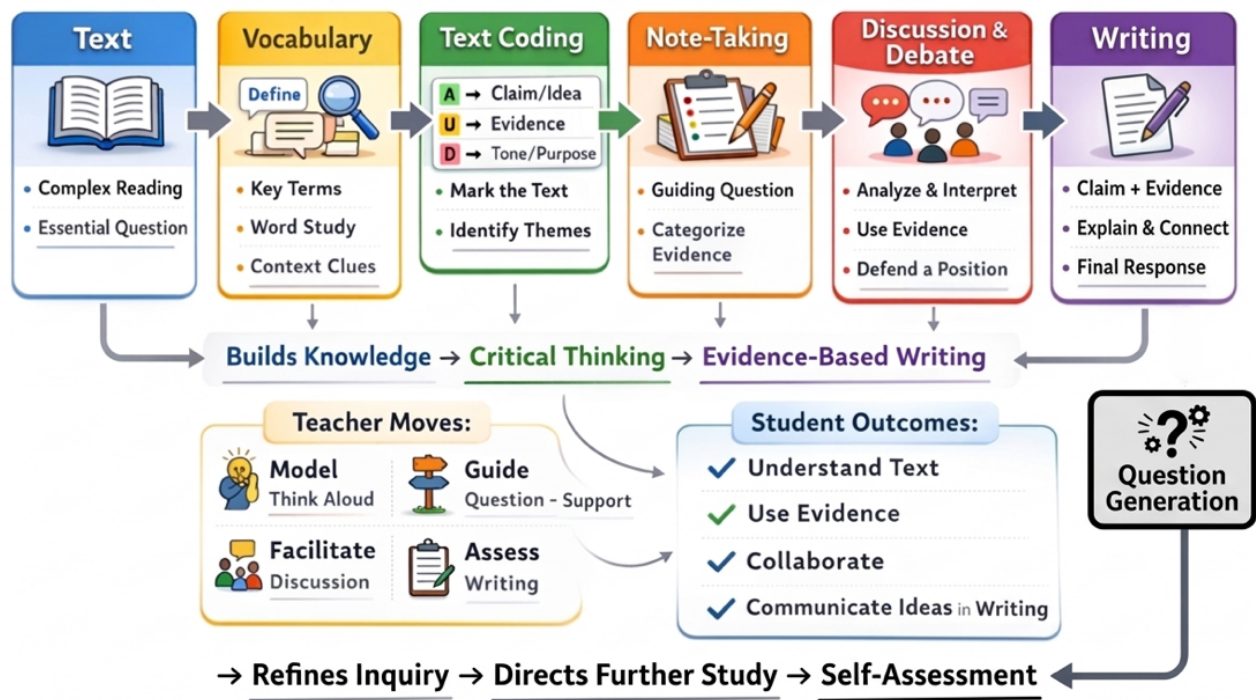
Core Instructional Routine Teachers Will Learn

The strategies used in this PLC are intentionally designed to be straightforward and adaptable so that teachers can implement them immediately within their existing lessons.

To address this need, this PLC is built around a consistent instructional routine that supports students in moving from understanding text to discussing and writing about it using evidence.

Adolescent Literacy Instructional Routine

From Text to Understanding → Discussion → Writing

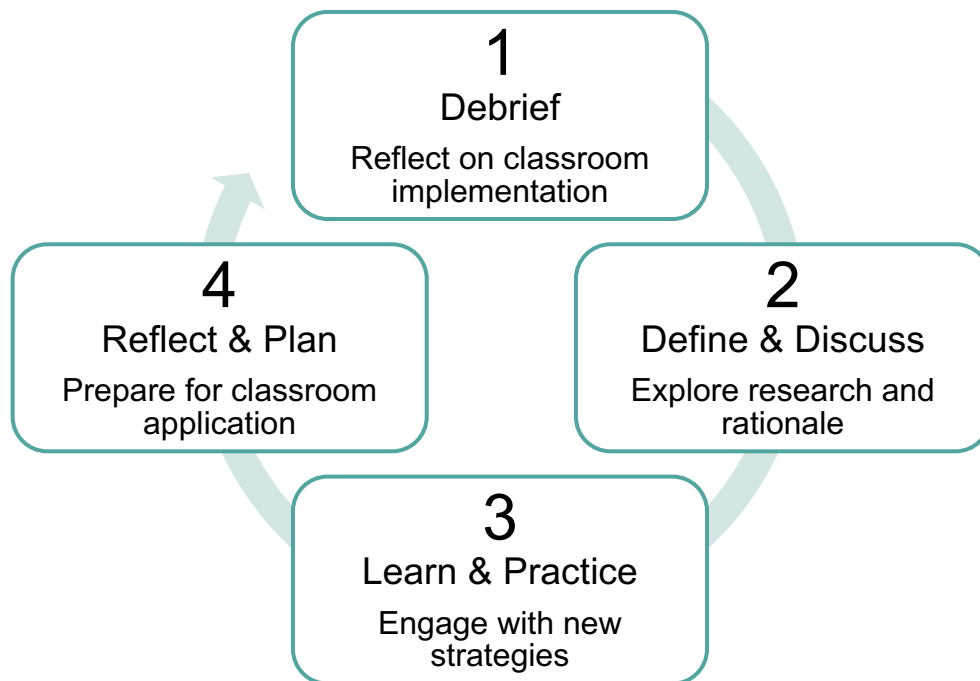


Review the Adolescent Literacy Infographic to see how these practices look in classrooms.

Content Area	Link	QR code
Social Studies	https://bit.ly/3N83hPB	

Four-Step Process for PLC Sessions

Each session guides teachers through the same four-step process, building consistency and confidence across the semester:



Skinny PLC Recommended Schedule

Session 1 — Understanding the Practices (~60 minutes)

- Part 1: Evidence-Based Literacy Practices (15 min)
- Part 2: Video — Seeing the Practices in Action (24 min)
- Part 3: Directed Note-Taking — Teacher Experience (15 min)
- Wrap-up and preview of Session 2 (6 min)

Session 2 — Seeing the Model in Action (~60 minutes)

- Debrief from Session 1 (5 min)
- Part 4: Sample Lesson Walk-Through and Review (45 min)
- Preview of Session 3 (10 min)

Session 3 — Planning for Your Classroom (~60 minutes)

- Debrief from Session 2 (5 min)
- Part 5: Draft Your Own Lesson (45 min)
- Part 6: Reflection & Commitment (10 min)

The PLC includes the demonstration video linked below produced in collaboration with Mississippi Public Broadcasting. This video illustrates how literacy strategies such as text coding and directed note-taking can be implemented in real classrooms. Facilitators may choose to show this video during PLC sessions to help teachers see how the strategies can be applied.

Video: *Improving Adolescent Literacy* (Mississippi Public Broadcasting – 24 minutes)

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzc8ZO7wpc>

Roles of School Leaders in Supporting the PLC

Your role goes far beyond logistical coordination. You help create the conditions for success, provide instructional coherence, and build a school culture that values literacy across content areas.

School leaders play a pivotal role in supporting high-quality literacy instruction across English language arts, science, and social studies classrooms. This guide provides a clear overview of what content area teachers in grades 4–12 will learn through adolescent literacy professional development, grounded in research-based practices. It also helps school leaders understand how to observe and reinforce these practices using the Guide and Checklists for a School Leader’s Walkthrough During Literacy Instruction in Grades 4–12.

The Four Key Recommendations and How They Look in Classrooms

1. Provide Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

What It Means

Teachers are trained to teach discipline-specific words explicitly, using structured methods and student-friendly strategies. Vocabulary instruction builds students’ independence in navigating complex texts.

What School Leaders Might Observe

- Dedicated time for vocabulary work in every lesson
- Students using semantic maps, word parts, or context clues
- Vocabulary integrated into discussions and writing tasks
- Word walls displaying key terms with visual supports

Walkthrough Look-Fors

- Students discussing or categorizing vocabulary
- Students completing vocabulary tasks tied to current content
- Students using academic language in their responses

Example Activity: Linear Array

In a history lesson using The Gettysburg Address, students arrange vocabulary terms (e.g., “independent,” “detained,” “liberated”) along a continuum from “free” to “captive.” This helps students internalize shades of meaning and deepens understanding of the text’s language.



Example of a linear array.

2. Provide Direct and Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction

What It Means

Teachers model how to use comprehension strategies like summarizing, questioning, and using graphic organizers. These are taught intentionally and practiced with guidance and feedback.

What School Leaders Might Observe

- Teachers thinking aloud while reading complex texts
- Students using graphic organizers to process information
- Strategy instruction adapted to different text types and subjects
- Scaffolded practice with gradual release of responsibility

Walkthrough Look-Fors

- Teachers modeling their thinking processes
- Students using tools (organizers, templates) to support comprehension
- Students explaining which strategies they’re using and why

Example Activity: Directed Note-Taking

In a social studies class, students reading *The Gettysburg Address* are asked: “Does the Gettysburg Address place greater emphasis on the past, present, or future in shaping American identity?” They record evidence from the speech into a graphic organizer under the categories Past, Present, Future, reinforcing how comprehension connects to meaning-making.

Directed Note Taking				
Directions: Record notes containing the most important information relevant to the guiding question.				
The Gettysburg Address				
Guiding Question: Does <i>The Gettysburg Address</i> place greater emphasis on the past, present, or future in shaping American identity and democracy?				
Page #	Notes	Check relevant categories below		
		Past	Present	Future

Example of a graphic organizer for *The Gettysburg Address*.

3. Provide Opportunities for Extended Discussion of Text Meaning and Interpretation

What It Means

Teachers facilitate structured, sustained discussions—whole group or small group—where students use textual evidence, build on each other’s ideas, and challenge interpretations.

What School Leaders Might Observe

- Student-led discussions with established protocols
- Text-based evidence supporting all claims
- Academic language used naturally in conversation
- Respectful disagreement and perspective-taking

Walkthrough Look-Fors

- Students referencing the text in their discussions
- Teachers prompting students to explain their thinking
- Established norms and protocols for academic discourse

Example Activity: Facilitated Extended Discussion

After small group prep, students debate: “Does the Gettysburg Address place greater emphasis on the past, present, or future?” Each group presents and defends a position using text evidence, listens to others, and has a chance to shift their stance at the end of the discussion.

4. Increase Student Motivation and Engagement in Literacy Learning

Teachers use interest-based hook questions, goal setting, autonomy-supportive practices, and collaborative tasks to keep students invested in reading and writing.

What School Leaders Might Observe

- Pre-reading activities that connect to students’ experiences
- Student choice in topics, texts, or response formats
- Visible goal-setting and reflection processes
- Collaborative tasks that promote peer learning

Walkthrough Look-Fors

- Hook questions tied to students’ lives that spark genuine curiosity
- Students collaborating and taking ownership of their learning
- Evidence of personal goal-setting or reflection

Example Activity: Hook Question

Before reading The Gettysburg Address, students consider: “What are the most important obligations we have as American citizens today?” This prompts personal reflection and sparks curiosity about the historical text, setting a meaningful purpose for reading.

Quick Start Implementation Checklist

Before Implementation

This table lists tasks to do before implementing the PLC. Assign who will do each task and when in the table below.

Task	Who	Date
Watch leader videos on adolescent literacy strategies.		
Identify and prepare the facilitator (coach, lead teacher, or administrator).		
Review PLC content, organization, and alignment with school goals.		
Select teacher participants (consider grade levels, content areas, and team dynamics).		
Create a module implementation timeline aligned with the school calendar.		
Secure meeting space and necessary devices and materials.		
Determine professional learning credits or incentives.		
Schedule the initial orientation meeting and communicate purpose and expectations to participants.		

During Implementation — Monthly Leadership Actions

Month 1	Month 2	Month 3
<i>Foundation Building</i> - Attend the opening session to demonstrate commitment - Conduct informal check-ins with participants - Begin brief classroom walkthroughs to establish baseline	<i>Strategy Development</i> - Use walkthrough tools to observe emerging practices - Provide encouraging, non-evaluative feedback - Address any implementation barriers	<i>Sustainability Focus</i> - Celebrate observed successes publicly - Plan for ongoing support beyond the PLC - Document lessons learned for future cohorts

Walkthrough Look-Fors During PLC Implementation

Pre-Walkthrough	During Walkthroughs	Post-Walkthrough
- Review lesson plans with teachers when possible - Understand which literacy component is being addressed - Plan for 5–15 minute observations to minimize disruption	- Focus on student engagement and learning, not teacher performance - Document specific evidence of the four literacy practices - Note innovative adaptations or creative implementations	- Schedule brief, non-evaluative conversations with teachers - Ask reflective questions: “What did you notice about student engagement?” - Offer specific, actionable feedback tied to observed practices

Sample Walkthrough Observations

Vocabulary — Science	Students creating concept maps linking new biology terms to familiar concepts, then using these terms in lab report writing.
Comprehension — Social Studies	Teacher modeling how to identify cause-and-effect relationships in a historical text, with students practicing using a graphic organizer.
Extended Discussion — ELA	Small groups preparing evidence-based arguments about character motivation, followed by a whole-class Socratic seminar.
Student Engagement — Cross-Curricular	Hook question connecting current events to historical patterns, with students setting personal reading goals for the unit.

Measuring Success

Short-Term Indicators (Within 3 Months)	Long-Term Indicators (6–12 Months)
- Increased use of academic vocabulary in student discussions - More students actively participating in text-based conversations - Teachers reporting greater confidence in literacy instruction - Observable use of comprehension strategies across content areas	- Improved student performance on text-based assessments - Students transferring literacy strategies between classes - Teacher collaboration extending beyond the PLC - Sustained implementation of evidence-based practices

Data Collection Strategies

Walkthrough Documentation	Track frequency and quality of observed practices
Student Work Samples	Collect examples showing strategy use across subjects
Teacher Reflection Surveys	Monitor confidence and implementation barriers
Student Voice	Gather feedback on literacy strategy usefulness

Addressing Common Implementation Challenges

Challenge	Leadership Response
“We don’t have time for literacy in content areas.”	Help teachers see literacy as a tool for deeper content learning, not an add-on. Share examples of how these strategies actually save time by improving comprehension.
These strategies don’t work for my subject.”	Connect teachers with same-subject colleagues who have successfully adapted the practices. Emphasize flexibility in implementation.
“Students resist academic discussions.”	Highlight the gradual release model and the importance of building discussion skills over time. Celebrate small wins.
“I need more support with implementation.”	Facilitate peer observations, provide additional coaching time, or connect teachers with mentor practitioners.

Sustaining the Work Beyond the PLC

Building Systematic Support	Professional Learning Continuity	Community Engagement
- Integrate literacy practices into lesson plan templates - Include content area literacy in new teacher orientation - Create teacher leadership roles for literacy champions - Establish regular peer observation cycles	- Plan advanced PLC sessions for experienced practitioners - Connect to district-wide literacy initiatives - Provide opportunities for teachers to present their successes - Maintain a resource library of materials and examples	- Share literacy success stories with families - Connect classroom practices to homework expectations - Celebrate student growth in literacy skills - Engage school board and community in understanding content area literacy

Additional Resources

Review these additional Adolescent Literacy Infographics for Science and English/Language Arts.

Content Area	Link	QR code
English/Language Arts	https://bit.ly/41y0Vgi	
Science	https://bit.ly/4crB6Th	

Final Thoughts for School Leaders

This PLC is more than a training—it’s a system for transformation.

Your support ensures that teachers feel empowered to embed literacy instruction into their content areas. When you model a commitment to instructional improvement, you signal that literacy is everyone’s responsibility.

Adolescent literacy is a shared responsibility. With consistent classroom walkthroughs and a clear understanding of the training content, school leaders can play a vital role in sustaining effective literacy instruction across content areas.

Key Contacts & Documentation

PLC Facilitator	
District Literacy Specialist	
Technical Support	
Total Professional Learning Hours	
Documentation Requirements	
Completion Certificates	

This guide is based on research from the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide: Improving Adolescent Literacy and was developed by the Florida Center for Reading Research and REL Southeast.