



# Reading, Writing, & Raising Voices: The Centrality of Literacy to Civic Education



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## Consider these questions:

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How often do social issues emerge in the texts you read and discuss with students in class?

How often do the young people in your life use reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills to participate in civic life?

If your response is “very often,” you have already witnessed the connection between literacy and democracy in action. English language arts is a foundational source of civic learning, and never more so than today, as young people navigate overwhelmingly complex media landscapes, battles over the social issues they are permitted to discuss in class, and an increasing range of opportunities available to them to take action on the most pressing issues threatening their futures.

And yet it can still seem a bit counterintuitive to connect ELA and civics in planning our

curriculum and instruction. This stems from how academic disciplines are conceptualized within the US education system. In most secondary schools, the curriculum is organized into discrete subjects (ELA, math, science, social studies, etc.). This structure encourages specialization and clear dividing lines between content areas that are re-inscribed through separate standards, teacher certification, and professional learning resources.

In many of our schools, civics is deemed the domain of the social studies department, not the English department. We English teachers are assigned to handle the workings of literacy while the civics teachers handle the workings of government.

But continuing to maintain silos that divide literacy and civic education diminishes the power and impact of both disciplines, as well as the curiosity, ingenuity, and agency of our youth. This guide offers a three-pronged approach to support ELA teachers in developing civically engaged literacy practices in their classroom that foreground equity, empathy, and engagement.

**LaMar:** In the beginning of my career, I definitely thought that only history teachers teach civics because civics is all about democracy. But then I thought, like, wait—we are democracy, right? I’m still doing that work to unlearn what I thought civics was. And so as an English teacher, I think: How do I have these conversations around civics in my class that don’t tie to specifically just government, but are as much or more about giving students opportunities to use their voices? Having them understand the power of the pen is a form of leadership, the ability to see a concept or an idea or something missing and working with others to problem solve. Our focus on text, whether it’s a comic book, a video, a podcast—our students are able to write about their perceptions of society, take evidence from what they’ve seen, and debate about it. I now think that in our discipline, we naturally are able to do the work of civics—not necessarily from the perspective of three branches of government or looking at legislation. But we’re able to go use government as an access point to begin to work with these various skills of discussion through these four strands of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.





# Defining Civically Engaged Literacy



Our journey begins by revisiting the nature and purpose of literacy and civics in schools today. We will then turn to three areas of ELA instruction that we can leverage to make our classroom practice more relevant to social and political life. These areas include:

1. **Social Literary Analysis:** Exploring the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that tell civic stories through reading and responding to an expansive range of texts.
2. **Critical Media Literacy:** Examining the tools of mass communication that shape US public dialogue about social and political issues through critically consuming and producing media.
3. **Community Conversations:** Participating in democratic dialogue and problem-solving through engaging in literacy practice with classmates and community members.

Voices of NCTE members and insights from scholarship published in NCTE’s journals will offer ideas and guidance along the way.

In order to dismantle the silos separating ELA and civic education, we must reconsider foundational ideas about the goals of our subject and the relationship between what we teach in the classroom and the wider world beyond our school walls.

Public schools have traditionally been conceptualized as training grounds that prepare young people for adult life. How many times have we reminded students that they will eventually use what they learn in our classes in the real world? This phrase implies that school is not quite “real,” but rather a prelude to students reaching legal voting age and taking on the rights and responsibilities of formal citizenship. It also suggests that students are not already community members.

This separation between school and society has major consequences for curricula by frequently adding a level of abstraction to what students are asked to know or do. In literacy, this can mean teaching basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking devoid of context (think worksheets), or perhaps giving assignments that mimic authentic writing genres but in actuality are read solely by the teacher to be graded and returned. In civics, students often learn facts about the three branches of government and other procedural elements of democratic life with perhaps the inclusion of a simulated election or town hall that remains limited to the confines of the classroom.

This abstraction creates a situation in which young people are mimicking or practicing for community engagement but not actually engaging with the community. School becomes a place for gaining civic knowledge and literacy skills that will be put into real world use later (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of this linear process).

Yet those of us who work with young people in schools understand viscerally that literacy practice and civic learning simply do not operate in linear fashion. Schools do not exist in a vacuum; they are situated within local, state, national, and global communities, subject to the influence of wider social events

Figure 1: Linear Relationship between School Learning and Civic Life





# Defining Civically Engaged Literacy

**Kim:** Why are we in school? What's the point of literacy if it's not a way to interact with others and produce and be seen and be heard and be in community? Civic engagement isn't jargon to me; it's the whole reason why I wanted to teach in the first place. I wanted to help students understand that the world is better with their voices in it, and that through English education, they have the power of wielding words, which is the best tool they could possibly have for life. And now I understand that all along, that was civic education.

and challenges just like any other public institution. Our students do not leave behind their lived experiences and identities and interests in civic life when they enter our classrooms; they are enacting citizenship now, not waiting for a formal status update. And education does not exist in tidy categories with distinct boundaries; we construct our civic worlds from moment to moment through the use of our reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills across the overlapping social contexts of our lives. These are the ideas undergirding a groundbreaking

new report and research synthesis about civic reasoning and discourse recently released by the National Academy of Education.

NCTE's Definition of Literacy in a Digital World reminds us that "As society and technology change, so does literacy." The definition, which expands how we think about reading, writing, and the nature of text itself, offers a vision for our discipline geared toward supporting young people to critically analyze and act upon the world around them through the power of their individual

and collective voices. It seeks to dismantle the boundaries between literacy and civic education and between school and society (see Figure 2 for a visual representation of these nested relationships).

Putting a commitment to civically engaged literacy into action in schools requires us to reflect upon the core elements of our practice, from text and assessment choices to pedagogical strategies and classroom culture. This guide offers three areas for reflection, along with strategies for innovating our teaching.

Figure 2: Nested Relationships of Civically Engaged Literacy



# Social Literary Analysis



Perhaps no other activity is considered as foundational to ELA classes as the study of literature. Delving into fictional worlds offers young people the opportunity to explore the beauty and power of the written word and creatively examine the human condition. Because literary texts (as well as informational and creative nonfiction texts) emerge from the minds of writers living within communities, social and political issues live on every page. As a result, stories can serve as a uniquely powerful source of civic learning. This potential often goes unrealized, however, when instructional approaches to the teaching of literature focus on the analysis of language in the abstract or on the narrow exploration of "timeless" or "universal" themes. Such approaches risk flattening or minimizing the striking diversity of stories that can illuminate the unique identities, perspectives, and histories of various civic communities, as well as engagement with the most pressing civic issues facing society.

The study of literature in the civically engaged literacy classroom merges literary and social analysis. Doing so requires us to reflect upon both



the texts we teach and how we teach them. Here are two suggestions for getting started. Our text choices communicate messages to students about the voices and topics that we find valuable in art and in public life. You have likely heard the

**Carefully curate a literature curriculum that encourages students to both see themselves and engage with the voices, experiences, and perspectives of wider civic communities.**

famous teaching from Rudine Sims Bishop about literary texts serving as mirrors, windows, and sliding doors. The value that Bishop attributes to literature here is not only academic and socioemotional, but civic as well. When students imaginatively interact with protagonists of varied identities and lived experiences, they gain access to the (fictional or actual) interior and personal lives of individuals outside themselves and come to understand that civic society is comprised of and has a responsibility to a wide range of communities. This is not simply a matter of tallying up the racial or gender identities of the authors of the books in your book room;

# Social Literary Analysis

concerted efforts to diversify the literature curriculum expose students to a variety of writing styles, topics, and perspectives on the world that are crucial for the development of civic awareness and engagement.

Sadly, the efforts underway in school districts across the country to restrict access to particular texts strike at the heart of the civic purpose of literature instruction. While often shrouded in language about “appropriateness,” the act of banning books represents an attempt to foreclose the development of empathy with others and quite literally exclude communities from the body politic. It is a profoundly undemocratic action not only because of its infringement upon freedom of expression, but also because of its erasure of minoritized communities from public life. The links that follow on p. 8 direct you to NCTE resources that can support you if you face pushback in the redesign of your literature curriculum.

Of course, the curriculum is only half of the equation. The instructional approach taken when teaching any text has the power to imbue or remove

**Seth:** We read *Just Mercy*, which deals with very relevant real-world topics. In the past, we would write research essays related to the topics in the book—mass incarceration, capital punishment, the war on drugs, etc. Then I decided to try something new—after students picked topics that they were interested in, I had them research texts on the topic and create a 5-10 minute digital video remix in which they spliced clips from news sources, documentaries, YouTube videos... They were making an argument through video form to shed light on their topic. I challenged them to think of three different audiences for what they created. The first level was their classmates and me. The second level was people outside our class—other teachers, parents, family members, friends, maybe their TikTok page. And the third level was folks working on the issues we’re talking about—legislators and community organizations.

Plan instruction that supports students to wrestle with the social issues surfaced by literary texts and practice creative and compassionate thinking about civic life.

the potential for critical civic learning— which leads to the second suggestion. Thanks to the nonstop efforts of generations of critical educators and scholars—particularly leaders from historically minoritized communities—the field of English language arts is now largely guided by some bedrock understandings about quality instruction. These include the understanding that teaching and learning should be centered on the identities, experiences, and interests of students, and that it should seek to celebrate and sustain students’ cultures. As we seek to develop student-centered and culturally relevant/ sustaining ELA instruction, we must keep in mind that culture is intertwined with the

civic contexts in which we live. Culturally relevant teaching must be civically relevant teaching. Social issues and current events are not situated far away or only at national or international scales; our students are walking into our classrooms each day living them.

Literary texts provide powerful entry points into discussions of social issues because authors weave their characters’ journeys through particular

historical and social contexts. Understanding how characters think about the worlds in which they live can support young people in developing opinions about their own worlds and the civic values that matter most to them. This requires teachers to treat literary texts as social documents; rather than focusing solely on literary elements or writing mechanics in the abstract, civically engaged ELA instruction leverages texts as springboards to tackle fundamental questions and

tensions about what it means to connect with our fellow human beings in democratic community. While literature is often praised for its ability to foster interpersonal empathy, just as important is its potential to cultivate a critical civic empathy in which we consider the role of power and privilege in our structurally inequitable society and strive toward more just civic futures.





# Social Literary Analysis

**Kim:** Take *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. We've been reading that for a really long time, right? We focus on the love story, the star-crossed lovers, and the tragedy of everyone dying. But this generation is so different because they are aware of and impacted by issues around mental health in so many different ways. They are sensitive in the best way; they notice what's going

on around them. When I read it with them, they couldn't care less about the romance. They were asking, why is no one checking in with Romeo? His parents don't even speak to him; they send messengers. They thought about how he seemed depressed. So I ended up designing a different assignment for this course when I saw their interest in mental health. We actually looked at the literature through a psychological lens, and students

developed diagnoses for the characters. It was empowering for them to dig into their interest in mental health further. My class is project-based, and one student was so into it that he brought it back to the real world and ended up creating a bereavement group for people who have lost someone. This 14-year old made that connection!

## Resources:

[NCTE Position Statement:](#)

[Indigenous Peoples and People of Color \(IPOC\) in English and Language Arts Materials](#)

[NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center](#)

[NCTE Build Your Stack®](#)

### NCTE Journal Articles:

Domínguez, A. (2021). [What our communities tell us:](#)

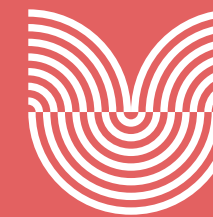
[Student-led ethnographic research](#). *English Journal*, 111(2), 42–48. After reading and discussing *A Raisin in the Sun*, students researched and wrote about the histories of their neighborhoods.

Simon, R., Hicks, B. I., Walkland, T., Gallagher, B., Evis, S. & Baer, P. (2018).

[“But in the end, you are all beautiful”: Exploring gender through digital composition.](#) *English Journal*, 107(3), 39–46.

*The authors examine photovoice projects created by students and teacher candidates who explored issues of gender in response to a young-adult novel and researched that process.*

# Critical Media Literacy



**A**s ELA teachers, we do not solely teach literature. Our specialty is the study of language and communication in its myriad forms. The variety of textual formats is increasing exponentially as digital technology gives rapid rise to a vast media ecosystem that is transforming every part of our lives, from how we socialize to how we communicate and participate in democratic life. To fulfill our mandate of preparing young people to leverage language for personal, academic, and civic purposes, we have a responsibility to support our students in analyzing, producing, and sharing media texts and to instill an understanding of the issues of power and voice that undergird communication platforms.

This task can seem overwhelming as media develops more quickly than many of us can process. Social media fads, deep fakes, constant mis/disinformation, and bullying emerge so often that many school districts treat digital media more as a source of risk and danger to be managed than as a tool for connection and engagement. The growing field of critical media literacy offers

resources to help us embrace what makes today's information ecosystem so powerful—the unprecedented ability for youth to raise their voices and make themselves heard about what they care about in the world. Here are two suggestions for getting started:

**Ask students to critically analyze a wide range of media representing the evolving information landscape.**

Rather than organizing our instruction around particular literary texts (e.g., “This is my *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit”), creating units based on civically relevant themes or questions paves the way for the curation of multimodal text sets that can include a wide range of media—news articles, primary sources, YouTube videos, podcasts, TikToks, and more. We can invite our students to take the lead in choosing texts that pique their interest and allow their choices to drive what is studied and created. Integrating texts into instruction that students encounter daily as they scroll

**LaMar:** I think my feminism unit is one of my favorite units. Most of the population of students whom I teach are young men and young men of color, so we discuss toxic masculinity. We discuss what it is to be a feminist. We center the character of Hippolyta from [HBO television show] *Lovecraft Country*. We center her journey. So, to work with young men and to see them really sit here and dissect themselves—to think about how they show up in their households with their moms and sisters and their partners or friends—is to see them grapple with the idea that “this is what society wants me to be, but I don't want to be that. So how do I create or make change within myself so that I can really coexist with women, and really be the advocate for women and stand up for women in ways that will allow me to really have equality and equity for all?”

through their social media feeds reinforces the centrality of literacy to their lives and sparks motivation to, as Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire teaches us, read the word and the world. More and more, the practices of democracy, from keeping up with current



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and reading an Instagram reel involve overlapping but unique skill sets; while we may talk with students about authorial intent in both instances, the discussion about what authorship means in the case of content posted on corporate-controlled platforms amid algorithms, remixes, and manipulation can be very different. Issues of control, power, and inequity can be discussed to assist our students in becoming savvy navigators of a constantly evolving media landscape.

organizing large-scale projects that involve formal social and political institutions; it is also about sharing information and opinions about the issues of the day with authentic audiences. It is about asserting our rights as community members to weigh in on the issues affecting our families and neighborhoods.

Harkening back to our earlier discussion of schools as being embedded in (rather than separate from) civic communities, the literacy artifacts that our students produce are more impactful when seen as living embodiments of their voice in society rather than artificial schoolwork. Instead of merely writing argument essays in the abstract for the purpose of learning a communicative structure for standardized exams, why not write arguments in forms that are most often used in civic life (hint: not essays) that can actually live in civic life? The students in our classes come to us brimming with curiosity and concern about the society they are inheriting, and there is no better application of literacy knowledge and skills than critically analyzing and acting on it.

**Seth:** I have what I call “bias and credibility conversations.” We look at a few different resources. We first talk about: What is bias? What is credibility? Why should we care about them when we’re analyzing content or assessing information? I get a baseline of where most students are, and then we take it to the next step. Just because a source contains bias doesn’t necessarily mean it’s wrong. It just means that this is the bias that they’re coming from—bias is part of human nature. We see the world through our experiences. So, we do need to learn about bias, but also expose ourselves to different perspectives. And then we must engage ourselves. If all we’re ever doing is just analyzing what other people are saying and not actually trying to contribute to the conversation or be thoughtful creators of media, then we’re only really learning half of what literacies entail.

## Plan opportunities for students to produce and disseminate media about meaningful social issues.

Considering the rich array of apps and software that exist to support young people in creating their own media—and the equally rich array of outlets through which they can disseminate that media—there is no reason that our students’ multimodal compositions should remain restricted to our eyes only to be graded and returned. Civic engagement is not only about

events to swaying public opinion, are taking place online. As a result, it is crucial that we dive into authentic media texts rather than adopting digital programs that stick to academic skills and avoid the hurly burly of the real world.

Integrating media into our curriculum does not only change the content we teach, but the nature of our instruction as well; this is because the practice of reading changes as we move across different modalities. Reading a novel

**Kim:** There’s misinformation everywhere. There’s anger everywhere. But there’s also hope everywhere. When we talk about media, I help students try to understand where people are coming from and exercise empathy. What makes people react the way they do? What would cause someone to spin a narrative? What would cause someone to leave a voice out? My teaching style is Socratic, because it’s not about what

the answer is for me. It’s about what the answer is for you. If we’re seeking first to understand, then the next piece is about how we can be more understood. So, I help students create content—whether it’s through blogs or their own talks, or by creating content for a Twitter chat—because I don’t want them to feel like they’re victims to other people’s words.





# Community Conversations

Once we embrace the idea that our students' writing should live beyond the classroom walls, a natural next step involves tearing down the classroom walls altogether and conceptualizing our practice in ways that encourage dialogue, collaboration, and action with community members. The communities within which our schools are embedded possess what educational researcher Tara Yosso calls cultural wealth. Neighborhood associations, knowledgeable elders, local businesses, libraries, museums, and beyond all are ripe for potential partnership. Civically engaged ELA curricula that features socially relevant themes, multimodal text sets, and authentic writing projects can go the next level through community dialogue and advocacy.

These efforts need not be limited to senior-year capstone projects or service-learning initiatives that exist outside of the ELA curriculum; instead, we can position democratic discourse at the center of what literacy means each day. Civic learning is activated not only through explicit lessons about social issues or the workings of government; as democratic philosopher John

Dewey reminds us, democracy is “enacted new in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.” Whether we are gathered in our classroom or in community spaces, we can call forth the relationships and values that we hope will guide civic life in the future. Here are two suggestions to get started:

## Collaborate with your students to enact democratic relationships within the classroom.

Schools often embody the contradiction of professing commitments to civic engagement in their vision of curriculum and instruction but then asserting authoritarian discipline policies and decision-making structures on campus. Students learn about democracy just as much from the culture and relationships that we establish in the classroom and hallways as they do from the content we teach. Furthermore, they are attuned to the hypocrisy inherent in the lip service they

**LaMar:** As your teacher, I am not telling you how you must think. I am not telling you that this is right or this is wrong. I am asking you for your thoughts. I'm presenting what's currently happening in the world. I'm presenting issues that people are going through—specifically people of color—in our society, and together, we are discussing it. So yeah, things about equity are going to come up. Racism is going to come up. Gender equality, too. These conversations are going to happen, because students have questions. I help them dive deeper. What do you think about that? Tell me where that comes from. Where did you learn that? How do you feel about that? Do you think there's another way to see this? Is there another perspective? When we do that work, we allow students to consider all sides. We allow them to think about multiple arguments, multiple perspectives, multiple lenses. We don't live in a world where there has to be just one way of thinking. The English classroom is a place to model that.

are often paid about their status as tomorrow's leaders while they are treated like naïve children today. Beyond the unit or lesson plan, we have the

## Resources:

[NCTE Task Force on Critical Media Literacy](#)

[NCTE Position Statement: Media Education in English Language Arts](#)

[NCTE James R. Squire Office of Policy Research in English Language Arts Policy Brief: Critical Media Literacy and Popular Culture in ELA Classrooms](#)

## Links to NCTE Journal Articles:

Evans, R., Goering, C. & French, S. (2021). “[Soundtracks, songwriting, and soundscapes: Producing the podcasts of our lives.](#)” *English Journal*, 110(4), 69–76.  
*Students create soundtracks, songs, and soundscapes to examine their lives during a pandemic in a changing world.*

Kelly, L. (2019). “[Building critical classroom community through hip-hop literature.](#)” *English Journal*, 109(1), 52–58.  
*An elective hip-hop literature course for juniors and seniors supported the students' critical media literacy and their sociopolitical development.*





## Community Conversations

power to make our teaching more civically engaging by disrupting the top-down, hierarchical procedures that remain the norm in much of K–12 education and explicitly collaborating with students to build a daily practice of democracy.

Building a democratic classroom culture involves questioning some of the foundational assumptions about “classroom management” that we have been socialized to believe since our days as students. How much choice do students have in the organization of time, space, and instruction in your classroom? What messages about autonomy, grace, and growth are being sent through your grading and discipline

policies? To what extent do your students feel a sense of purpose and ownership of their learning? How do members of the classroom community treat each other? What values guide classroom discussions? These are not questions that you need to answer alone; rather, they can serve as the catalyst for honest and vulnerable dialogue with your students—dialogue that does not end after the quick establishment of norms at the beginning of the year, but rather persists through ongoing check-ins and adjustments. Once you and your students can sustain a democratic culture within your classroom, you will be better prepared to interact productively with a wider circle of community members.

**Tear down the classroom walls to engage in student-led inquiry, advocacy, dialogue, and action with community members.**

Whichever issues pique the interest of your students, chances are that someone in your community possesses expertise or perhaps dedicates time to addressing those issues as well. This expertise could exist at the local level, in which case in-person dialogue and action may be possible. It could exist in a distributed network

across the state, country, or globe, in which case digital communication may be the best avenue to pursue. Civically engaged ELA instruction does not consist merely of planning for guest speakers or one-off field trips, though these are certainly a start; instead, we can work toward sustained journeys of inquiry that are directed by students and help them understand the multiple moving parts and long arcs of organizing public issue campaigns.

The exact nature of these collaborations can take whatever shape works for you and your students. Perhaps your entire class wants to work together to raise awareness and take action with community partners around a common issue. Perhaps small groups of students will determine research questions tailored to specific interests and leverage their literacy skills to investigate and share findings about their topics. As mentioned earlier, civic engagement invariably

involves the sophisticated use of literacy skills. It may take some creativity, but it is possible to ensure that grade-level reading, writing, listening, and speaking standards are being met through the inquiry upon which students embark. And more importantly, students will have the opportunity to learn how to interact empathetically with a wide range of peers and adults in pursuit of a common civic goal.

**Seth:** To me, the purpose of English language arts is not just to become better writers and communicators, but to be able to engage with the world outside the classroom. I try to make my classroom a relevant space

for students—a place where we talk about things that are going on in the outside world. I don't want this to be a vacuum, like, “Hey, we're going to talk about stuff in here, but it's totally disconnected from what's going on in society.” I think it's important to bridge

those two things. It's important to first talk about the things that are going on outside the classroom, but also teach students that they have a voice and can contribute to that broader discourse.



## Conclusion

Just as democracy is a constant work in progress, so too is the civically engaged ELA classroom. There is no endpoint—no moment at which we can sit back and say that we have fully achieved the goal. Yet, this is not cause for frustration, but rather evidence

of the beautiful ongoing struggle toward more just and equitable futures to which we can be proud to dedicate our professional lives. This also means that we need not seek to overhaul our entire curriculum at once; instead, we can see each small tweak that we make

to our practice—a new text selection here, an assignment revision there—as a step along the path to radical reimagining of what literacy instruction can be and an investment of hope in a more compassionate civic life.



### Resources:

[NCTE Position Statement: Educators' Right and Responsibilities to Engage in Antiracist Teaching](#)

[NCTE James R. Squire Office of Policy Research in English Language Arts Policy Brief: Racial Literacy](#)

#### Links to NCTE Journal Articles:

Haddix, M. (2018). "[What's radical about youth writing?: Seeing and honoring youth writers and their literacies.](#)" *Voices from the Middle*, 25(3), 8–12.

Marsh, V., Lammers, J. & Conroy, E. (2021). "[Students as change-makers: Five steps to advocacy research.](#)" *English Journal*, 111(12), 56–63.

*When students used a solutions journalism approach to research local problems, their attitudes about research changed and their commitment to action grew.*





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