



# An Argument for Disciplinary Information Literacy



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Teachers become experts in their discipline and its writing conventions after years of study. However, we ask students who switch subjects five or six times a day to change disciplinary lenses every hour or so. We can imagine students' feeling baffled: Why is an author's nationality or temporal context so important in history but hardly rates a mention in science? Why can nothing be said definitively about *The Great Gatsby* but authoritative claims can be made about proof of the Pythagorean Theorem?

As an alternative to the established approach of integrating generalized information literacy skills into projects and papers, consider an appeal directly to teachers' expertise so that students can develop skills within the framework of subject-specific content. As Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan have explained, disciplinary literacy recognizes that "disciplines differ extensively

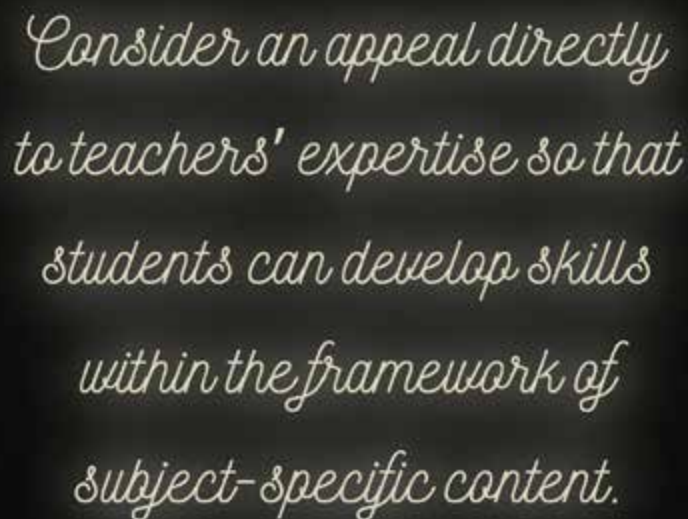
in their fundamental purposes, specialized genres, symbolic artifacts, traditions of communication, evaluation standards of quality and precision, and use of language" (2012, 11). William G. Brozo and colleagues explained: "Unlike the outside-in approach of generic content reading, disciplinary literacy evolves from the inside out because the text itself and the goals for reading the text dictate the reading process" (2013, 354). In other words, rather than asking all teachers to take responsibility for teaching their students the same reading and information literacy skills, ask content specialists to focus on disciplinary literacy and teach reading in the manner their disciplines demand.

A recent discussion with high school history teachers about what they had to "unlearn" their students was revealing. They mentioned the propensity of students to include direct quotations in their writing; historians prefer

summarizing or paraphrasing to efficiently incorporate secondary sources in an essay. The history teachers also mentioned that their students put too much emphasis on transitions between ideas, felt unnecessarily compelled to attach their discussion of a past event to a contemporary issue, and often took great liberties with their interpretation of events. These are the same skills English teachers strive to cultivate among young writers discussing literature. It is no wonder students, even conscientious students, are confused.

Applying Shanahan and Shanahan's definition of disciplinary literacy to information literacy requires development of skills beyond the ability to simply read and write; it requires a broader definition of literacy. Information literacy depends on abilities to search, identify, evaluate, parse, and effectively re-communicate information. It implies a broad level of fluency in confronting, handling, and communicating information in all its mediums, a set of skills we might refer to as disciplinary information literacy. The student who is disciplinarily information literate is able to access, identify, evaluate, parse, and effectively re-communicate information in a manner appropriate to a given discipline.

Reframing our collaborations around disciplinary information literacy is not an unreasonable goal. Making our students explicitly aware of the differences between researching and writing in history versus English or science will help students code-switch as they move, physically and mentally, from discipline to discipline throughout their school day and assignments. With this



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### Works Cited:

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method, in collaborating with our colleagues, we can help learners become sophisticated participants in the scholarly conversation.

What might this look like in practice? Imagine how you might support a science teacher frustrated with her students' attention to sensationalized scientific research on television news. Propose a lesson for young dramatists about why the latest James Bond film was a box office hit but panned by critics. Use nerd jokes: What do World History students need to know to find Queen Elizabeth's nominating the Spanish Armada for the ice bucket challenge funny?

Such an approach gets at the very essence of individual disciplines and appeals to a teacher's subject expertise. Disciplinary information literacy encourages the cultivation of an understanding

of how information is handled by experts in the discipline and asks students to assume the mantle of scholars, adopting the practices of mathematicians, journalists, playwrights, scientists, and poets. Student perspectives that are legitimized and positively reinforced through practice will only get better and more refined. Teachers see the bigger picture when they intentionally teach students how to use information like a historian (or scientist or artist or mathematician) rather than attempting a piecemeal attack on a specific information literacy skill. Discipline-driven projects are by their very nature more organic and better aligned with authentic inquiry. Most surprising of all, discipline-driven information literacy projects also tend to be interdisciplinary. Academia may divide up the world into specific subject areas, but real life does not.