



Literacy Centers

What Is It?

Literacy centers are an exciting, self-motivational way to enhance, develop, or extend learning within a classroom. At literacy centers, students work alone or interact with one another using instructional materials to explore and expand their learning (Diller, 2003). As students are engaged in meaningful literacy tasks at centers, the teacher is able to provide reading instruction to small groups of students without interruption. Smaller group size provides a greater opportunity for teachers to provide instructional scaffolds and engage the learner (Pressley, 1998). In addition, small-group instruction allows for a more effective type of strategic coaching. Strategic coaching appears to be one of the key elements that distinguish high-achieving classrooms from those with moderate or low performances (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999).

Why Is It Important?

Research shows that to increase students' intrinsic [motivation](#) and keep their attention, teachers must provide choices and make learning relevant, personal, and engaging (Jensen, 1998). Literacy centers capitalize on different learning styles, providing opportunities for multisensory learning that combines auditory, visual, and tactile elements into a learning task. Research on [multiple intelligences](#) indicates that effective teachers structure activities in a style that engages most or all of the intelligences. These types of activities excite students about learning and provide opportunities for reinforcement of skills and concepts in a variety of ways (Gardner, 1983). [Activating multiple intelligences](#) facilitates a deeper understanding of material.

How Can You Make It Happen?

Literacy center activities are opportunities for students to practice and extend the standards they are learning during instructional time—skills and standards that are critical to advancing students' knowledge about literacy. Centers are not used to introduce new skills or for activities unrelated to core instruction; rather, they help students become independent with the literacy skills they have already learned.

Students will be successful, independent learners if literacy center tasks are developmentally appropriate and if clear expectations are set. Effective literacy center tasks are scaffolded for students and provide models of exemplary work. Communicating the expected outcomes of the tasks and developing a system of accountability will increase the accuracy and completeness of student work.

When selecting materials for literacy centers, include familiar materials used previously during large- and small-group instruction. Modeling and guided practice will guarantee students understand the procedures for using the materials.

Literacy Center Activity	Procedure for Using Materials
Students use dry-erase boards and markers to list the words they build at the letter center.	Model how to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Replace the caps tightly on the markers.2. Erase the board using a tissue.3. Throw the tissue away.4. Stack the dry-erase boards in a neat pile on the shelf.

Remember, most children need to be *taught* to be independent. If students are not adhering to [classroom guidelines](#) during center time, you need to intervene. First, identify an area of focus based on an observed need, such as how to use a browsing box or tape recorder. Explain and model the procedure for the students. Allow opportunities for shared and guided practice through role playing. Provide corrective feedback during this phase to ensure clarity of expectations. As students return to working at centers independently, regularly monitor their progress (Opitz, 1994).

Grouping Options

- Teacher Working with Small Group
- Letter Center
- Big Book Center
- Writing Center
- Overhead Projector Center
- Listening Center

How can you *Stretch* Students' Thinking?

One of the greatest challenges in managing an [elementary classroom](#) is to occupy the time of students who are away from the teacher with meaningful literacy activities. For a teacher to work with a small group of children, the other students in the class must be engaged in meaningful learning. Opitz and Ford (2001) concluded that, "Clearly, the power of the instruction that takes place away from the teacher must rival the power of the instruction that takes place with the teacher."

During 90 minutes of small group instruction, a teacher may work with three reading groups for 30 minutes each. In this scenario, each child will spend approximately 60 minutes away from the teacher. How can you best engage students in literacy activities during this time? Students not working in a small group with an adult should be engaged in independent tasks that are directly related to small-group or whole-group instruction, or working at literacy centers. It is essential that the work the students are asked to do be meaningful and also allow them to expand their learning.

Literacy centers are defined by developmentally-appropriate academic standards. The activities are designed to reinforce the objectives that are being taught during the school day. For example, if a skill for sentence structure is taught during the reading and writing block then it should be reinforced during center time.

If implemented appropriately, literacy centers can increase students' intrinsic motivation and keep their attention by providing choices, making learning relevant and personal, and making learning engaging (emotional, energetic, physical) (Jensen, 1998).

When can you use it?

- **Reading:** [Reading](#) centers can be created to fit just about any topic. Generally, a center is focused on independent, peer, or shared reading, or it is connected to skill activities taught prior to the center time. Some classrooms include centers that focus on reading the walls; reading books, magazines, or posters that go along with topic; or are connected to a listening center. The centers may include a pocket chart, an overhead projector, a word wall, [vocabulary](#) review, or working with Microsoft Word. Skill centers may include activities that use [graphic organizers](#), posters, flashcards, phonemic-awareness letter tiles, or other manipulatives.
- **Writing:** Centers addressing this area should include [writing for pleasure](#), to share information, or to convey meaning. Types of tasks used in the writing center include fill in the blanks; [story starters](#); short-answer response, [graphic organizers](#), or [poetry](#). Students may use writing centers to create books, cards, stories, poems, recipes, lists, newspapers, charts, maps, or directions. A writing center can be used in virtually any content area.
- **Math:** Ideas for enhancing [math](#) centers mainly call for the use of manipulatives. Some topics that are easily reinforced during center time are data collecting and analysis; sequencing of items by size/number or by time elapsed; learning to [tell time](#); [counting money](#) or other manipulatives; taking [measurements](#); or learning one-to-one correspondence.
- **Social Studies:** Centers addressing [social studies](#) themes are natural extensions of units. [Literature](#) activities, role-playing, and [drama](#) are great extensions to reinforce themes. Other ideas to enhance social studies units include WebQuests, [reading or creating maps and globes](#), studying transportation models, solving puzzles, and playing any type of money games to reinforce economic standards.
- **Science:** Use literacy centers as a natural extension of a [science](#) unit. Be sure that the activities involve observing, hypothesizing, or experimenting with the subject of study. Students should be encouraged to ask "What if?" questions on a regular basis. Vocabulary or word study is also a natural inclusion in a science study area. Also, using a hand lens to investigate is always a favorite with children.