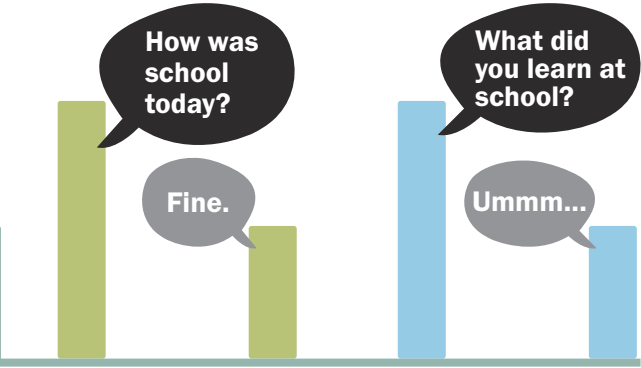


# Building Knowledge and Skills in the English Language Arts Classroom

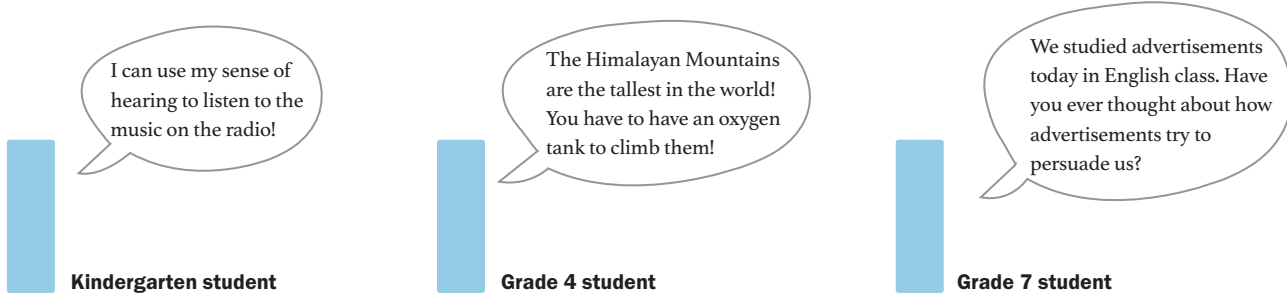
A Statement from Great Minds®



Chances are, if you are a parent or caregiver, you've experienced this type of conversation:



It is likely not what you hope to hear. Imagine a student responding to “What did you learn at school?” like this:

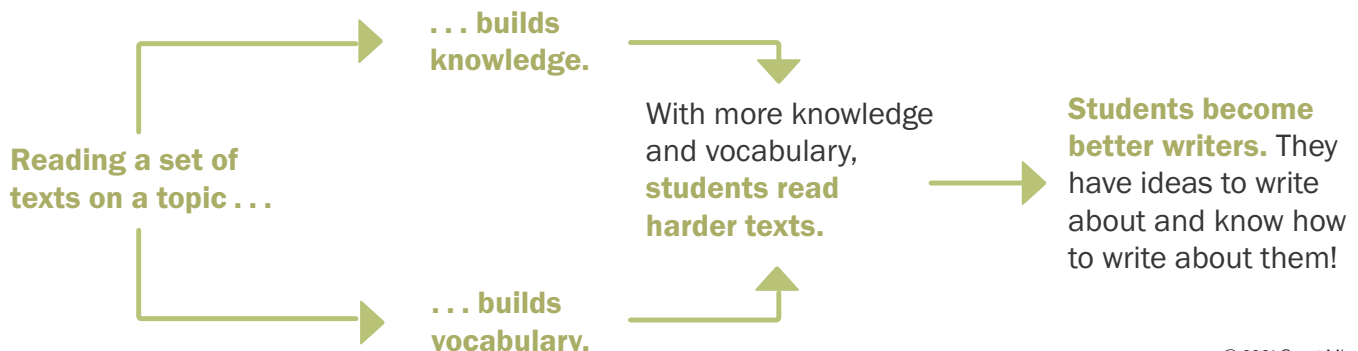


What might help students share more of their learning?

## Building knowledge is critical to literacy success.

Families, caretakers, and teachers share the same goals: everyone wants all students to be engaged and excited about learning. In school, students should build the knowledge and skills to pursue their dreams and passions. How do families and teachers meet these goals?

Strong reading, writing, and communication skills are essential. In school, students build these skills in the English language arts (ELA) classroom. Students learn to read, write, and communicate by reading, writing, and communicating. But students cannot practice these skills on their own. They must read, write, and communicate about something. When students know a lot about a topic, they can more easily read, write, speak, and listen. When ELA teachers build students' knowledge, they also build students' literacy! Let's look at how.



**“Students with more knowledge have a better chance of understanding whatever text they encounter. They’re able to retrieve more information about the topic from long-term memory, leaving more space in working memory for comprehension. They’re also better able to absorb and retain information, because knowledge--like Velcro--sticks best to other related knowledge.”**

–Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap*

**Knowledge makes learning easier.** To learn anything, students make connections with what they already know. Reading one book on a topic prepares them to read a second book on a topic. When students know a little, their brains are ready to make connections to learn more.

**Reading a lot about a topic builds a strong vocabulary.** Not every word is teachable. In fact, most vocabulary comes from reading and listening. When reading about one topic, students have many opportunities to read new words multiple times. When students talk about what they are learning, they use those same words in conversation. Reading and talking about texts on a topic helps students learn new words.

**Knowing about a topic helps us as readers.** Reading about something students do not know much about is more challenging than reading about a familiar topic. Because knowledge helps readers understand texts, it is helpful for students to study a topic in depth. As students learn more about the topic, they can read increasingly difficult texts about that topic—and related topics. Students benefit from reading a variety of texts—informational books, novels, picture books, poetry, mythology, news articles, speeches, charts, graphs, film clips, and fine art—that are all organized around a focused topic.

**Knowledge improves students’ clarity and communication in writing.** Increased knowledge of a topic leads to more ideas for writing, and it helps students express those ideas more clearly. Reading different books on a topic gives students ideas of different ways to organize and write about their ideas on the topic.

**More writing leads to more opportunity to improve students’ writing skills.** Students improve their writing when they write often. When students know more, they write more. By writing more, they improve their skills like sentence writing, paragraph structure, and style. Students can focus their attention on improving these writing skills because they are not worried about what they want to say.

---

## Teaching with strong materials improves students’ outcomes.

Research shows that when teachers teach with high-quality materials, students learn more. In the English language arts classroom, the materials teachers use must build students’ knowledge so that they can build their literacy skills. Students thrive when they have families and caregivers who support them; when their schools provide strong teaching and quality materials; and when they learn about topics that spark their curiosity to learn more and give them ideas to read, write, and talk about.

Imagine talking with a student whose face lights up when they have learned something new. In a strong English language arts classroom—where students build knowledge, read complex texts, and write and talk about what they are learning—students build the literacy skills they need to succeed in school and life.

### Keep Reading:

**Korbey, Holly.** “Is it Time to Drop ‘Finding the Main Idea’ and Teach Reading in a New Way?” Edutopia, 28 July 2020, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/it-time-drop-finding-main-idea-and-teach-reading-new-way>. Accessed 20 July 2021.