Putting discourse first

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Discourse is all about communication. Putting discourse first is a form of scaffolding that can yield more thoughtful discussions about the language choices speakers and writers make and how language awareness can help students advance their communicative purpose most effectively.
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It was a Monday morning meeting in Mr. B's online kindergarten class. Pang had just shared her story about visiting her grandmother over the weekend.

"Does anyone have a question for Pang about her visit to grandma's house?" asked Mr. B.

A student asked Pang who else went with her to visit her grandmother and Pang responded. Mr. B. praised the question and added, "Now we know about all the characters in Pang's story! What is another question we can ask to learn more details about the visit?" There was a question about what they ate at grandma's house, what they did, and another about where grandma lived. After each response, Mr. B. linked information to one of the story elements, "Great question! Now we know more about what happened during Pang's visit!"

Figure 1. Story Elements

Sharing stories is an important part of kindergarten, building relationships, practicing listening and speaking skills, and asking focused questions. Mr. B. was also very intentional in building his students' awareness of story elements and the type of information they could expect in a story genre. Language Expectations for the Key Use Narrate helped Mr. B. focus his feedback and questions during morning meeting to make these discourse patterns more explicit to his kindergarteners.
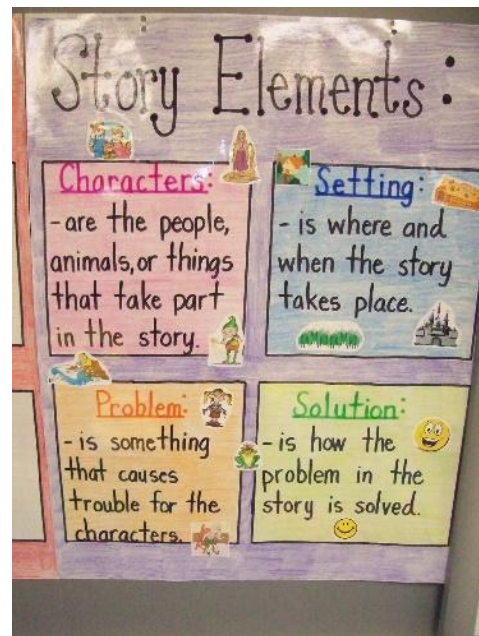
Introduction

The 2020 edition of [WIDA's English Language Development (ELD) Standards Framework](#) (WIDA, 2020)[1] emphasizes the importance of discourse when teaching and learning English. This more comprehensive focus reminds us that meaning-making moves beyond the word or sentence level, occurring *across* a conversation or several written paragraphs. A discourse focus strengthens the interface of language and content learning and helps prepare students for the purpose—is it explaining how or why something works, or retelling events in a personal story? This article explores what is meant by discourse and how putting discourse first adds more tools to our students' language development toolboxes.

Discourse: Building meaning beyond the clause

Simply put, *discourse* is language stretched across spoken or written text to accomplish a communicative purpose (Rose & Martin, 2012). Common discourse purposes like sharing personal experiences or stories, providing information about something, how to do something, explaining how or why something works, or justifying one's position all make use of organizational patterns that build meaning across larger stretches of text, whether spoken, written, or multimodal. These purposes follow predictable patterns and allow members of a shared linguistic community to quickly recognize the reason for communicating (Bernstein, 1990; Hyland, 2007). As shown in Figure 2, all meaning-making occurs within the sociocultural context, with word and sentence choices embedded within the larger discourse purpose, or genre.
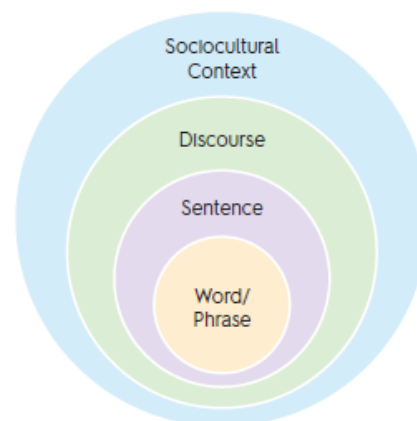
Figure 2. Dimensions of Language Within a Sociocultural Context

Genre is another term describing discourse as a communicative purpose (Martin & Rose, 2008). Literary genres help us recognize different types of narratives such as historical biographies or adventure stories. Arguments and explanations are examples of genres common across content standards with distinctive structures and patterns that help differentiate one purpose from another (Brisk, 2015; de Oliveira et al., 2019; Rose & Martin, 2012).
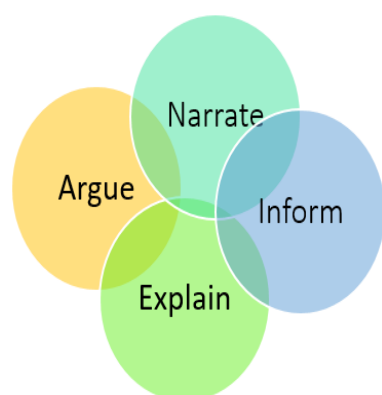
Figure 3. WIDA Key Language Uses

Drawing from the research on genre-based pedagogy (Brisk, 2015; Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Gibbons, 2009), WIDA has identified four high leverage genre families across the academic content standards. *Key Language Uses*—Narrate, Inform, Explain, and Argue—exemplify common discourse structures of particular importance in schooling. While each Key Use has distinctive structures and patterns (defined in Table 1), they do intersect, blend, and build on each other. Identifying the Key Language Use at the onset of a lesson immediately helps to identify the range of appropriate language choices, or language possibilities, making the task more manageable for multilingual learners.

The sociocultural influence on discourse

Discourse patterns are determined by the linguistic and cultural community they serve, setting norms for how language is used in a variety of contexts (Bernstein, 1990). Norms inform topics, degree of formality, sentence complexity, and word choices as well as behavioral norms, turn-taking, tone of voice, interrupting protocols, and so on. The sociocultural context determines what type of information is important. For example, when retelling stories, some communities value character actions while others value a character's introspection. In some communities, embellishing stories is seen as an art, indicative of the storyteller's skill—in others it is seen as

Genre	Definition
Narrate	Language to convey real or imaginary experiences through stories and histories. Narratives can serve many purposes, including to instruct, entertain, teach, or support persuasion.
Inform	Language to provide factual information. As students convey information, they define, describe, compare, contrast, organize, categorize, or classify concepts, ideas, or phenomena.
Explain	Language to account for *how* things work or *why* things happen. As students explain, they substantiate the inner workings of natural, human made, and social phenomena.
Argue	Language to justify claims using evidence and reasoning. Argue can be used to advance or defend an idea or solution, change the audience's point of view, bring about action, or accept a position or evaluation of an issue.

Table 1. Definitions of the Key Language Uses

untruthful or boastful behavior. In some communities sharing "how-to" information is verbal; in others, it is observational.

Within the larger society are smaller discourse communities (Derewianka & Jones, 2016), such as groups of friends, families, social clubs, and faith-based organizations, each with their own unique discourse protocols. We generally belong to many such communities and have learned to adjust our language and behavior to fit the context. School is another example of a specialized discourse community.

School discourse, particularly the more formalized aspects of written language, reflects the communication preferences and values of the larger linguistic and cultural group. Standards, standardized assessments, textbooks, and school-based expectations project this preference as it relates to education. Students coming from other cultural and linguistic traditions may be less familiar with American school-based discourse across subject areas and may require more explicit instruction from educators. Being explicit with students about discourse norms and their relationship to context, purpose, and audience helps students meet grade-level expectations and provides students with more tools to present their own messages.

In the classroom

Ms. Froemming, an English Language Learner teacher, found that being explicit about school genres made a huge difference in how her first grade multilingual learners were able to produce text that met the grade-level writing standards.

Ms. Froemming's first graders were given a prompt to "write all about an animal." This was intended to be an information report to meet English Language Arts writing standards but students interpreted the prompt as an invitation to just "say stuff." They didn't have a solid understanding of the discourse structure. Ms. Froemming decided to spend time deconstructing information reports so students could begin to develop an understanding of how reports were organized. She read examples from several
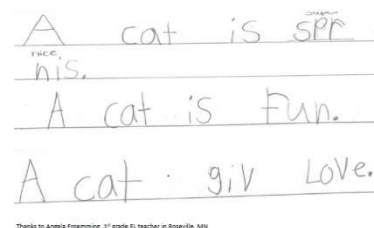
Figure 4. First write

books and with the students started to make lists about the patterns they noticed across the various information texts. They also talked about how diagrams and pictures added information about the animal. The class created a template for presenting key information—i.e., what the animal looked like, what it ate, where it lived. Ms. Froemming and students co-constructed timeless present statements, made substitutions with pronouns, and practiced labeling visuals. By developing a strong awareness of the genre, students were able to produce their own "All about…" information reports (see Figures 4 and 5).
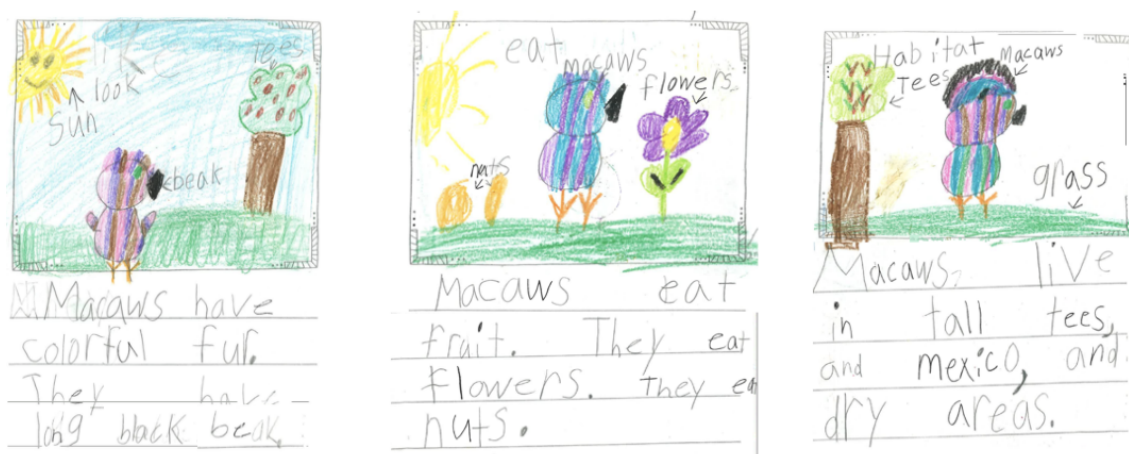

Figure 5. Finished information report

The shift: Big picture first

Putting discourse first is a form of scaffolding that can yield more thoughtful discussion about language choices. Narrowing the focus by genre, context, and audience allows for deeper observation about how some language choices advance the purpose better than others.

In the classroom

Mr. Yager has 9th and 10th grade students in his 3rd period class. They've been reading an article about employees who were fired after participating in immigration protests and the arguments critiquing the employer's behavior.

"The school has focused on arguments all year, so kids are pretty familiar with the Claims-Evidence-Reasoning pattern. I start by identifying the audience. Who is this written for? That allowed us to get into deeper conversations about word choice, and the power of a word to create a reaction—does it appeal to your heart or your head? My students like this approach, we can be more creative and combative… I have word rays all over my room—less strong to most strong, more objective to more emotive. And, we play a lot with audience; what if we write this for X group, how do our choices change? For me, this bit of a backward approach helps me focus on grammar and vocabulary that is more relevant, and the connection to what we're doing is so much clearer." Figure 6 provides an example of how educators might help students to think about the power of word choice in writing an argument.
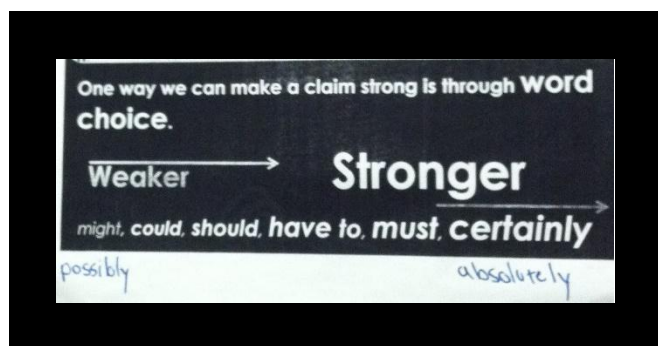
Figure 6. Linear Array with Modals

WIDA ELD Standards Framework

The 2020 Edition of the WIDA ELD Standards Framework reflects this shift in focus. Whereas this latest edition continues to organize language in three dimensions (Discourse, Sentence, and Word/Phrase), the Discourse Dimension features more prominently than the others, and encompasses three criteria: organization, cohesion, and density of language. This reflects WIDA's more functional approach to language development where the purpose of the overall text guides language choices at the sentence and word/phrase levels.

This greater emphasis on discourse helps educators create a tighter alignment between standards, achievement criteria, objectives, activities, and assessment. Figure 7 unpacks the components in the WIDA ELD Standards Framework.
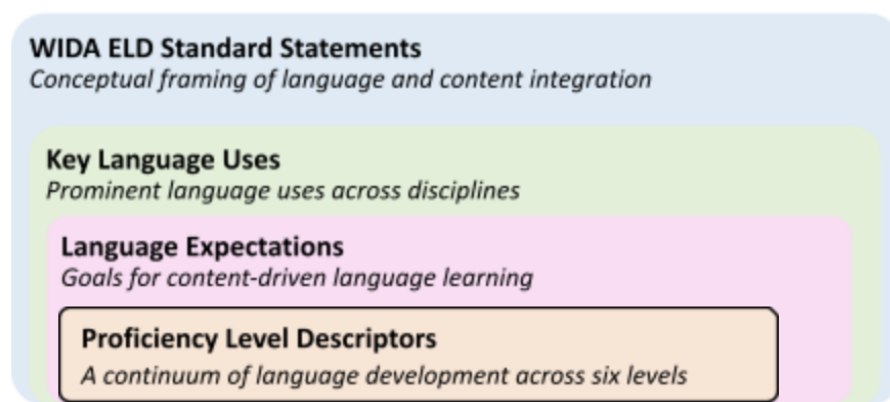

Figure 7. Components in the 2020 WIDA ELD Standards Framework

- The ELD Standards Statements reflect WIDA's belief that multilingual learners are best served when they learn content and language together.
- As shown earlier, Key Language Uses prioritize high leverage, school-based discourses (Argue, Narrate, Inform, Explain).
- The Language Expectations integrate language and content learning goals appropriate for each grade level cluster and within disciplines (language arts, math, science, social studies).

- The Proficiency Level Descriptors provide guidance for how multilingual learners may be developing proficiency at each grade cluster and within the familiar dimensions of discourse, sentence, and word/phrase level.
- Language Functions and Features list how discourse criteria are met through grammatical structures. The specificity of these criteria helps educators target language forms necessary to advance the genre. Each level of the ELD Standards Framework drills deeper into how language is functioning to accomplish a specific purpose.

In the classroom

Mrs. Sorenson was co-teaching with the 4th grade teacher on a cyclical explanation. The unit goal was for students to create a poster of an economic cycle with detailed explanations of each stage of the cycle. Mrs. Sorenson realized many students needed a deeper understanding of how a cyclical explanation followed a different organizational structure than an information report. She started with the "big picture" of these two Key Language Uses and a familiar topic from 3rd grade science.

She wrote several informational sentence strips about butterflies and several other sentence strips about a butterfly's life cycle. Two small groups organized the strips and read them to the whole class, which determined if they made sense. Mrs. Sorenson then mixed up the order of students in each group and had them re-read their sentence strips. She asked the class if the meaning was still clear.

The class determined that *informing statements* were still clear, but statements that explained the cycle were not. The order of statements in an explanation is very important, but not so, when informing. In the ensuing language discussion, students were able to talk about different purposes for the statements and start to notice clues, such as sequence words, and cause/effect descriptions that helped identify an explanation.

Mrs. Sorenson knew she needed to focus more on how these two genres were different. After all, explanations and informational reports share many language functions and features. Both establish a neutral or objective stance, use timeless verbs to state on-going facts, relating verbs to state attributes, rely on referential devices to create cohesion, make use of abstract nouns… all grammatical resources that are the same. Yet, these two genres are distinctive in their purpose—one describes a topic, one explains a phenomenon.

Figure 8. Example Manipulative Cards

To help students differentiate between these two purposes, Mrs. Sorenson created a series of activities for students comparing informing statements with those explaining part of how or why something happens.
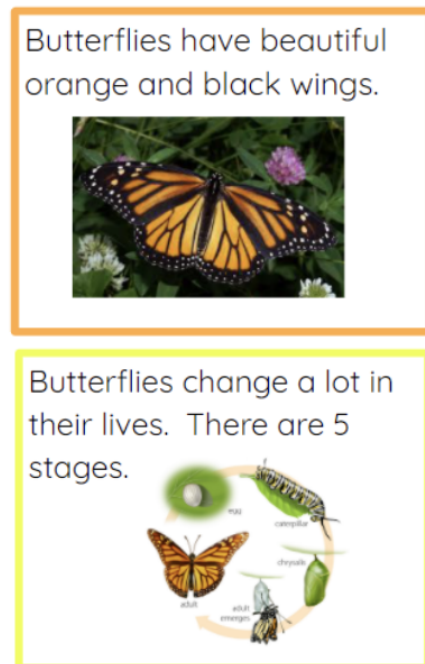
Communicative purpose: Preparing students for writing tasks and assessments

There is a high value placed on writing in schools. Students are regularly asked to respond to prompts, write reports and comparisons, analyze data, explain relationships, and demonstrate their language proficiency through writing. Writing requires an explicit understanding of cultural and linguistic norms of specific discourse communities. It requires an awareness of valued communicative purposes and how to organize text in a way that enables others to quickly recognize the communicative purpose. As shown in Table 2 below, communicative purpose has been woven into the first criterion (Organization of Language) of the Discourse dimension, and this is also reflected in the grade-level cluster Proficiency Level Descriptors now available with the 2020 WIDA ELD Standards Framework.

Toward the end of each proficiency level, when scaffolded appropriately, multilingual learners will...

Criteria	End of Level 1	End of Level 2	End of Level 3	End of Level 4	End of Level 5	Level 6
	Create coherent texts (spoken, written, multimodal) using…					
Discourse Organization of language	sentences that convey intended purpose with emerging organization (topic sentence, supporting details)	short text that conveys intended purpose using predictable organization (signaled with some paragraph openers: *First… Finally, In 1842, This is how volcanoes form*)	expanding text that conveys intended purpose using generic (not genre-specific) organizational patterns (introduction, body, conclusion)	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns (statement of position, arguments, call to action) with a variety of paragraph openers	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns with strategic ways of signaling relationships between paragraphs and throughout text *(the first reason, the second reason, the evidence)*	text that conveys intended purpose using genre-specific organizational patterns with a wide range of ways to signal relationships throughout the text

Table 2. Excerpt from Grades 6-8 WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors for the Expressive Communication Mode (Speaking, Writing, and Representing)

Without framing around communicative purpose, so much of student writing lacks cohesion, purpose, strong word choices, varied sentence structures, and sometimes even comprehensibility. In other words, the Discourse Dimension's first criterion in the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors (Organization of Language) helps set the stage for how the other five criteria are shaped in student writing: Cohesion, Density, Grammatical Complexity, and Precision of Language (shown in Table 3 below).

Dimension	Criteria	Focus
Discourse	Organization of language	Organizational patterns characteristic of the genre
	Cohesion of language	Cohesive devices connect ideas within and across sentences and larger sections of discourse
	Density of language	How phrases and clauses are expanded to include more detail or precision, or condensed using abstract nouns
Sentence	Grammatical complexity of language	Relationships expressed through simple, compound, and complex sentences
Word/ Phrase	Precision of language	Everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language appropriate for topic, audience, purpose

Table 3. Dimensions of Language in the WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors

A discourse framing begins to narrow the scope, helping students eliminate language that doesn't pertain to the task or prompt. Let's look at a typical middle school prompt used to evaluate students' writing: "**Write a letter to your principal about whether you think your school's electronics policy should change and why**."

The prompt clearly defines a communication mode (letter), the audience (principal), and the topic (school's electronic policy). Less obvious is the genre but there are clues identifying opinion (think) and reasons (why). Now the purpose becomes clearer—an opinion statement to change or not the current school policy on the use of electronics, in the form of a letter to the principal. As students continue to plan for their writing, they can think about language implications. Writing a letter implies a specific structure with a greeting and closing—a recognizable structure. Writing to a principal implies greater formality in word choice (disagree vs. hate; because vs. cuz). An opinion requires a position and examples or reasons to be included. The response might include a counter argument, and it will most likely need some type of conclusion. This awareness of genre helps students tailor their writing in consideration of audience, context, topic and purpose to create the most meaningful response they can at any point in their language development.

Final thoughts

Language is a social enterprise governed by the communities it serves. The language of schooling reflects the assumption that students can recognize and use salient, predictable patterns that occur within and across disciplines. Building explicit awareness on how genres are organized and the language choices that advance meaning is critical for providing access to the target language—by listening or reading, speaking or writing. When we, as educators, are clear about the purpose of discourse—whether it seeks to tell a story, explain a phenomenon, provide

information, or present a claim and evidence—we provide a clear roadmap for students to navigate discourse in school-based language communities.

Note

1. Portions of this article contain excerpts from the *WIDA English Language Development Standards Framework, 2020 Edition: Kindergarten-Grade 12* (WIDA, 2020), Wisconsin Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, on behalf of WIDA.

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Author bios

Dr. Cynthia Lundgren has a long history working with multilingual learners of all ages. A master teacher, Cindy has taught in K-12 for over 30 years. Most recently a researcher at WIDA, Cindy works with teachers to create more opportunities for students to engage in rich conversations that support deeper awareness of how language functions. Prior to joining WIDA, Cindy was an assistant professor at Hamline University. She has expertise in the areas of systemic functional linguistics, second language literacy, multilingual methods, and teacher education.
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Dr. Lynn Shafer Willner works to improve equity and accessibility for multilingual learners through the design of digital tools, accessibility and accommodations research and guidelines, and standards for multilingual learners. While working at WestEd, she served as Lead Author of the 2014 ELPA21 ELP Standards. Since her arrival at WIDA in mid-2014, Lynn co-authored the WIDA Accessibility and Accommodations Framework. As part of her work on the WIDA ELD Standards Development Team, she created the alignment architecture for the 2020 Edition. She is grateful for Cindy's leadership in infusing genre-based pedagogy and techniques throughout the 2020 WIDA ELD Standards Framework.
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Feature image