



Teaching K–12 Literacy in a Digital World



HMH Into Reading™ is differentiated by design to honor the needs of teachers and provide students with a rich, integrated, and measured path to growth in reading, writing, and communication.

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Introduction

Today's world is filled with technology we never could have predicted five or ten years ago, and with this ever-changing tech comes countless questions. How do we adapt lesson plans to keep up with the newest developments? How does social media affect students' attention spans and well-being? How will literacy evolve in this digital landscape?

One thing we know for certain is that students will read and write differently as a result. But while we often refer to them as "digital natives," these students are not born into the world knowing how to utilize digital resources, especially in an academic setting. Whether it's deciding which online sources to trust or discerning when to click on a hyperlink, these are skills we have to teach them.

Literacy in our digital world involves videos, sounds, ads, blogs, and much more. It's up to us to show students how to navigate through endless distractions to arrive at the trove of infinite information, stories, and resources available to them. So, read on and discover how we can cultivate literacy experts in our digital world.



Why and How **Reading Is in Crisis**

Carol Jago

HMH Author and Associate Director, California Reading & Literature Project at UCLA

Could it be that focusing on what students should know and be able to do has caused us to lose sight of what we want students to *be*—readers and writers who can and do read and write?

I don't mean to suggest that standards haven't brought both consistency and transparency to curricula. They have. The tail, however, has begun to wag the dog. Instead of providing a map of the skills required for literacy, standards have themselves become the goal.

For me, standards should be like a computer's operating system, running efficiently and silently in the background, supporting basic functions, and controlling peripherals. Maybe the comparison breaks down when it comes to controlling classroom peripherals like paper airplanes, but standards are not the endpoint but the very underpinning for our lessons.

Everyone would agree that the goal is to help children become confident learners who can read and write and choose to do so. Too often, practicing discrete skills in isolation consumes instructional time better spent reading.

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After all, students only develop automaticity with basic reading skills in the process of re-applying those skills over and over in many different contexts and with many different kinds of texts.

Consider for a moment your own fluency on a computer. I'll wager you are really good at the applications that you use every day and much less so with programs you may have sat through training on but rarely use. Practice doesn't always make perfect, but it does make permanent.

Let's apply this idea to reading. Once students have acquired the basic skills, what they need most is time with the books. I love research that supports what I already believe. Survey results from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading for eighth and twelfth grades demonstrate what English teachers know in their hearts to be true: Students who read become better readers than those who don't.

NAEP Survey Data



Eighth-graders who read five or fewer pages per day scored lower than those who read more pages in school and for homework. Twelfth-graders who read at least six to ten pages per day in school and for homework scored higher than those who read five or fewer pages.



Eighth-graders who read for pleasure almost every day scored higher than those who read for fun less frequently. Twelfth-graders who read for pleasure almost every day scored higher than students who never or hardly ever read for fun.



The implications of these NAEP findings are clear. If we hope to see improvement in reading achievement, students will need to read significantly more in many different contexts for a variety of purposes including their own pleasure. We should be every bit as concerned about the large number of students who don't read as we are about those who can't. Volume matters.



Into Reading or **Into Themselves?**

Carol Jago

HMH Author and Associate Director, California Reading & Literature Project at UCLA

The Pew Research Center recently released [2018 survey results](#) revealing that 95 percent of teens say they have, or have access to, a smartphone. While this is hardly surprising to anyone with eyes, I gasped at the speed with which the devices have become ubiquitous; in Pew's 2014–2015 survey, only 73 percent of teenagers said they owned a smartphone.

Even more alarming to me is the fact that 45 percent of those surveyed report that they use the internet “almost constantly”—almost double the number who said the same in the 2014–2015 survey.

The rate of change suggests that in a few years, all students will be online all of the time. What effect will this have on their reading and thinking? What effect has it already had?

Reading is a very different intellectual process from broadcasting oneself online. When students read, they gaze outward to a larger world. Readers travel albeit vicariously to other times, other lands. Books offer insight into lives that are unlike their own. Social media, on the other hand, foster solipsism.

When students read, they gaze outward to a larger world.

Teenagers, of course, are and always have been natural solipsists. As a long-time teacher, I saw firsthand how their fixation on themselves and their friends often became claustrophobic. Social media can exacerbate this.

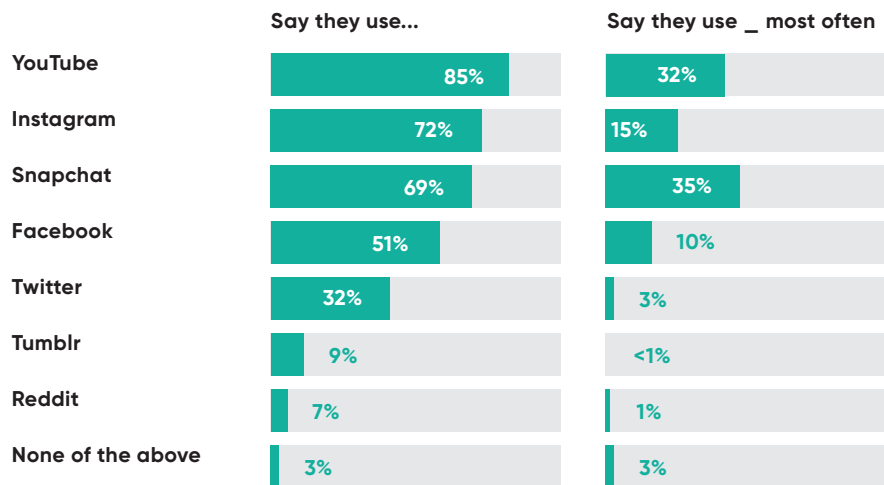




Composing nonstop virtual storylines of their lives on YouTube (85 percent), Instagram (72 percent), and Snapchat (69 percent), teens find themselves caught up in a seductive hall of mirrors.

YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are the most popular online platforms among teens

% of U.S. teens who...



Source:
Pew Research Center

Teens fear that if they step away from social media even for a moment they will be sidelined. They are afraid of missing out, falling behind—afraid that their online community will move on without them and unless they broadcast themselves they will be forgotten.

There is nothing new about this adolescent fear. But the pressures of online performance increase their neurosis exponentially.



While it is not within a teacher's power to pry smartphones from students' hands, we can invite the teenagers in our care to open a book for a draught of fresh air. **Reading demands that we look outward, beyond the familiar boundaries of our lives. It stretches our imaginations. Reading also teaches us that we are not alone.** James Baldwin identified this experience when he wrote "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive."

Like most bibliophiles, I don't read and never have read to improve my comprehension skills. I read because I am hungry to know more about, well, everything. I love being able to click and have a book at my fingertips and adore having hundreds of books at my fingertips wherever I may be. It would be foolish to reduce our response to the Pew study to a lament for the good old days. You know, there never were any good old days.



When Books Go Viral, Online and Off

Carol Jago

HMH Author and Associate Director, California Reading & Literature Project at UCLA

Reading teachers adore seeing books passed urgently from child to child.

Jenny to Amy: "Look what Curious George is doing!"

Amy to Joachim: "That's one funny monkey. You gotta see this, Joachim."

Joachim to Cole: "Cracks me up! Want to borrow it?"

From Dav Pilkey's *Dog Man* to Tom Angleberger's *Origami Yoda* to *Harry Potter*, beloved book series can spread like a virus. One young reader falls in love with a book like Karina Van Glasser's *The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street*, and before you know it, all her friends are reading the novel and urging you to find them a copy of *The Vanderbeekers and the Hidden Garden*.

What if this "infection" spread to a wider group, if children could find other readers who lived not just down the block but across the land?

What if teachers could harness the power of social media to promote pleasure reading and develop students' capacity for talking about books? Survey after survey reports alarming statistics regarding the amount of time children are spending glued to their screens. Pediatricians respond with recommendations for limiting children's online time. The American Academy of Pediatrics [suggests a maximum of one hour](#) for children under six. Today's parents are in something of a panic, torn between adhering to the recommended guideline and coping with a fractious child. Maybe there is another way.





Jocelyn Brewer is a psychologist whose specialty is digital nutrition. Rather than fixating on the number of minutes children are online, she suggests considering more carefully what they are consuming, according to [an article in *The Guardian*](#).

“It’s not just about whether you consume any potential digital junk foods, but also your relationship to technology and the role it plays in your family life,”

Brewer says. “We know that using screens to soothe or pacify kids sets up some concerning patterns of relying on devices to calm or distract a child (or teen, or adult) from their experience of unpleasant or uncomfortable emotions – so we want to avoid using screens to placate tantrums, just like we want to avoid eating ‘treats’ to calm emotional storms.”

One free, protected social network for readers aged 6–12 is [Biblionasium](#). The site offers a platform for children to share what they are reading and discover new books. It has been awarded the Milken/Penn GSE Erudient Prize for Innovation in Borderless Education. Imagine Goodreads for kids.

Biblionasium also provides many features to help teachers keep track of student reading, but to me, the site’s greatest value is how it fosters an online community of young readers. Somehow, a book recommendation from someone your own age carries greater weight than a teacher’s recommendation.

Looking to improve your students’ digital nutrition? Show them where to find healthy choices!



New Media or News Media?

Dive Into Both

Erik Palmer

Program Consultant, *Into Reading* and *Into Literature*

Media literacy. There's a lot of interest in it right now. A problem is that often educators think media literacy means understanding digital sites, which means teaching students how to avoid being fooled by fake stories on Facebook. We need to change that. Let's define media literacy correctly.

Students cannot be media literate if they don't understand the word media.

A workable definition is that media are the means of mass communication. In other words, we use media to spread messages to large audiences. What medium do you want to use to get your message out to the world? Newspaper? Television? Internet blog? Magazine? Social media site?



MEDIA: The means of mass communication that can be used to spread messages to large audiences, whether in the form of newspapers, TV, internet, magazines, social media, etc.



NEWS MEDIA: Media intended to share information and current events, with the overall goal of providing relevant, timely, and accurate information.





The first step toward media literacy is understanding the various types of media and being able to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each. Here, we'll look at news media.

News media have as their purpose to share information and current events. Note the “as their purpose” phrase. The intention is not to entertain, not to persuade, not to sell, but to provide information. If we share this definition with students, much of the problem of falling for “fake news” disappears: Fake news doesn't come from news media.

Here are four tips for teaching media literacy to K-12 students in the digital age.

1

Tell students to avoid instantly reacting to a headline.

Do not forward, share, or retweet something until reading all of it and looking at the source. The media literate person knows to check the source.

2

Explain to students that older may be wiser.

Look for good ol' news media: magazines, newspapers, and television channels that have been around and have long histories in the business. Your students should be aware that there are newspapers and magazines with histories that go back hundreds of years. There are television channels that have been here since TV was invented. Start there—yes, the “mainstream media.”

Do not be fooled by people bashing mainstream media. Look at the word: mainstream. Not fringe, not troll-farmed, not sensational. If a story is for real, these sources will have it covered. **The media literate person knows to check the old pros first.**



3

Teach them that biased does not mean false.

There is a lot of news to cover. How does the media decide what to present? Recently, I was channel surfing as I sat on a stationary bike. At the top of the hour, two channels had very different leads to start their broadcasts. Channel A led with Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign manager, being found guilty of several financial crimes and talked extensively about his work on the Trump campaign. Channel B led with an arrest of an illegal immigrant suspected of killing a young woman in Iowa. Is either one fake news? No. Each reported what actually happened. Nothing was made up. No reporter lied. Is there bias? Maybe. Could A be biased against Trump and want to feature stories that make him look bad? Could B be biased against immigrants and want to feature stories that make immigrants look bad? Sure. But neither is lying about what happened. **Being media literate means being aware of bias and also understanding that it is possible to be biased while telling the truth.** Information that shows something you don't want to see is not fake news.





4

Portray media as a best friend of the people.

News media are critical in a democracy. Voters must be informed if they are to make good decisions. A little history: Within minutes of creating a new country, our Founding Fathers decided to make 10 changes to the Constitution. The very first change they proposed?

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment protects the press, the news media. Why? The Founders were worried that the press, not specifically mentioned in the articles setting up the government, could be attacked. Before anything else, they wanted to guarantee freedom of the press along with the others.

"... the freedom of the press, as one of the great bulwarks of liberty, shall be inviolable."
—James Madison

"Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost."
—Thomas Jefferson

The Founding Fathers realized that a free and respected press would help hold government leaders accountable, publicize important issues, and educate citizens so they can make informed decisions. Attacking the press, then, is a very dicey proposition. If the press is demeaned, those three things don't happen. Who will perform those functions? This is not a liberal or a conservative issue. We all must agree that a free press is critical to a well-functioning democracy.



Let's Get Internet Literate

Erik Palmer

Program Consultant, *Into Reading* and *Into Literature*

In the last chapter, we defined media as the means of mass communication. We use media to spread messages. One way we do that is through print: magazines, books, and newspapers. Another way we do that is through the internet. No one can be media literate without being internet literate. But unfortunately, after all this time with the internet as part of our lives, people are surprisingly internet illiterate.

**No one can be media literate
without being internet literate.**

I wrote a book, *Researching in a Digital World*, after visiting a second-grade classroom. The teacher had received a grant to purchase a class set of Chromebooks, handed each student one, and set them off to do their research projects. Each child was assigned a country and had some blanks to fill in on a handout: "size of country," "famous person," "favorite food," "location on map," "economy," and so on.

Forget for a moment that this minimal direction led to some dreadful in-class presentations: "My country is Brazil. A famous person is Peel. The economy is financial. The food is mo-something-I-can't-pronounce . . ." Agreed, Pele and moqueca are tough for second graders.

But what upset me more was that these students were given absolutely no instruction about the internet: what it is, how to be safe, how to search. My experience has been that this teacher represents the norm.

Let's help students become internet literate.





You didn't "find it on the internet."

You used the internet to find some computer somewhere that is connected to the internet. The internet is not a place. It is a vast network of computers linked together.

Every computer can create a findable site. You may have found a computer at the Smithsonian Institution. You may have found a computer in Skippy Wisnewski's house. Information from one of those is better than information from the other. Every student needs to be taught to examine the source. Find "About Us" or "Home," and check the credentials of the site's creators. Always check more than one site. Know the difference between .com, .edu, .gov, and .org. Examine simple things. Does the site look sharp? Are there links to other sites (a bibliography, if you will)? Is the author obvious? The internet literate person examines every site.

It's not all information.

Some sites are for fun. There is no Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus, but someone created a site about it as a joke. Some sites make things up for perhaps sinister reasons. The Pope did not endorse Donald Trump, but WTOE News 5 reported it. WTOE News? Bogus "news" site. Some sites are designed to sell. One second grader came across a site reading, "Austria. Here are our most popular tours." The internet literate person knows to check for the site's purpose.





Google does not always put the best stuff at the top of the search page.

Google makes a best guess at what you will like and places it near the top of the page just after the sites who paid Google money to be listed first. After a small amount of surfing, Google has you profiled. "Male, 18–35, interested in sports, conservative" or "Female, 45–55, educator, liberal," and so on.

Search results are adjusted to appeal to each individual. For our second graders just starting on Chromebooks, searching "Italy" will get pretty generic results . . . for adults! That's why the kids came across content they could not understand.

There are search engines for young folks such as KidRex, by the way. The internet literate person understands that there are different search engines and a little bit about how page ranking works.

Hyperlinks and ads are death.

I sent my math students to a website that is highly touted as a place for students to learn. I asked them to get a little introduction to geometry from the site. Within five minutes, some students were looking at goulash recipes, some were watching a Korean music video, and some were shoe shopping.

The site's text under "Intro to Geometry" was something along the lines of: "Lots of gross things start with the letter G, like goulash [hyperlink] . . . but we'll make geometry as fun as Gangnam Style [hyperlink] dancing." At the margins were "Hover for Ad" options. I love goulash and if you haven't seen Gangnam Style, check it out. But tell students to never get distracted by a hyperlink. The mere presence of one can derail the train of thought— "should I click on this?"—and clicking on hyperlinks destroys focus. The internet literate person understands the inherent distractibility in online reading and has been taught to stay on track. There is more to being totally internet literate (see *Researching in a Digital World*), but this will give you and your students a pretty good start. And we are making good progress on the quest to become media literate across all types of media.



Know Your Media:

Images, Sound, and Video

Erik Palmer

Program Consultant, *Into Reading* and *Into Literature*

Once upon a time, stories were simple. We opened a book and read words printed in ink on paper. Maybe a couple of pictures would be on the page.

Now think about what you find when you read online. Quite a different animal, right? We talked about internet literacy in the previous chapter. There is another aspect of the internet that is worth noting: sound, image, and video are everywhere. Every web search takes us to pages that contain words and much more. This changes the nature of reading. We find articles with sound and video attached, printed words accompanied by spoken words, and podcasts and videos with soundtracks. These additions to the words we are reading dramatically affect how we interpret those words. To be media literate, then, it is imperative to understand how sound, image, and video impact us.

Using sound and image to manipulate is not new. Years ago, I taught my students to be aware of how advertisers were crafting commercials to influence their behavior. I wanted students to become active, critical consumers of what they saw, rather than passive, unthinking receivers of commercial bombardment. That goal is even more important now because the bombardment from the online world far exceeds that from television.

Share these ideas with students.

To be media literate, then, it is imperative to understand how sound, image, and video impact us.





Images have power and are chosen for a reason.

Do a web search for images only. Search “Adopt a pet.” What do you notice about all the images? Adorable kittens and puppies, dogs with cute expressions, animals that look hopeful—in other words, pets you have to have. Now search “World’s ugliest dog contest.” (Yes, there is such a thing.) What would happen if you replaced the pictures at the adoption sites with these pictures? Search for images about some place. For example, have some students search “The best of New York City” and others “The worst of New York City.” Is it a place you want to visit or not? Depends on the images you are shown, right?

In my civics class, I would have students search “Good [insert name of president] pictures” and “Bad [insert name of president] pictures.” I’d ask them to be aware of the pictures accompanying any articles they read and think about whether the pictures chosen are designed to influence what you think of the president.

Pay attention to the soundtrack.

We don’t usually think about it, but soundtracks are everywhere. I was watching sports recently. The music leading to breaks during the NFL game was quite different than the music used at the golf tournament. The football music is bold and loud while the golf music is stately and calm. Why? What does the music say about the target audience?

Have students notice sound and discuss how sound affects mood. Do a web search of “how music can change a scene” or “how music can change a movie.” One of my favorites is a [YouTube video](#) where the creator has added different soundtracks to the same film clip. Search “changing a movie soundtrack to make it scary.” One [result](#) makes “The Sound of Music” seem like a horror film simply by changing the music of the movie’s preview.





Use sound and image purposefully.

A teacher asked her students to create a podcast. Part of the requirement was to include sound and image. Students discovered that GarageBand, a podcast creation tool on Apple devices, has a lot of music that can be easily be added. Students had a blast listening to all the options and finally selected a 20-second soundtrack that amused them. It looped 15 times during their five-minute show. Yes, I got sick of hearing it—but more importantly, it added absolutely nothing to the message presented. Don't let students use sound and image haphazardly.

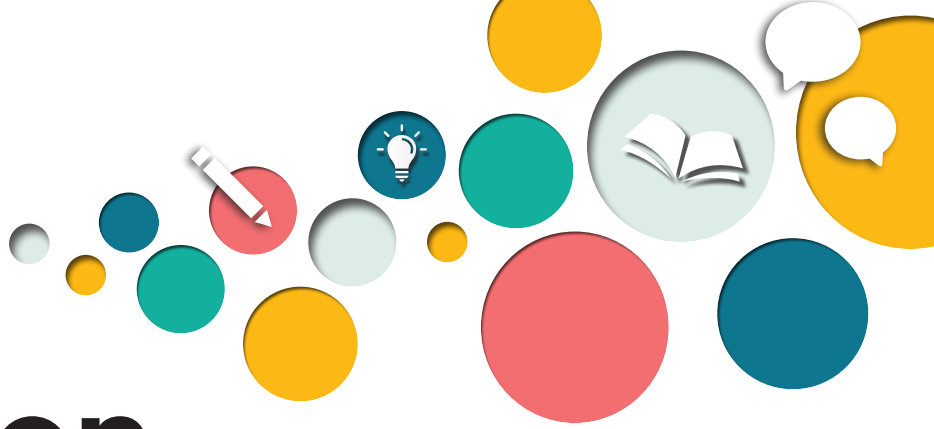
Analyze video.

You didn't go to the UCLA film school, but you don't have to be an expert to help students understand that video is a collection of sound and image. I still enjoy "[A Pep Talk from Kid President to You](#)." Show it to students. Discuss the message of the video, and then discuss the video. Did the music help the message? Why did he film it in a locker room and in front of a chalkboard with X's and O's instead of, say, a shopping mall? Why zoom in on his face and then zoom out? Every decision was made for a reason.

Show students political commercials at [The Living Room Candidate](#). Notice the use of sound and image selection used to sell presidential candidates. The cell division video you show students in science? That can be analyzed, too. How did the sound and images and montage help you understand mitosis?

Bottom line: Reading online is more complex than reading a book. We have to "read" sound and image, and to be literate today means understanding how they impact messages. You'll find that these are fun and easy lessons to teach, and students will love becoming media literate.





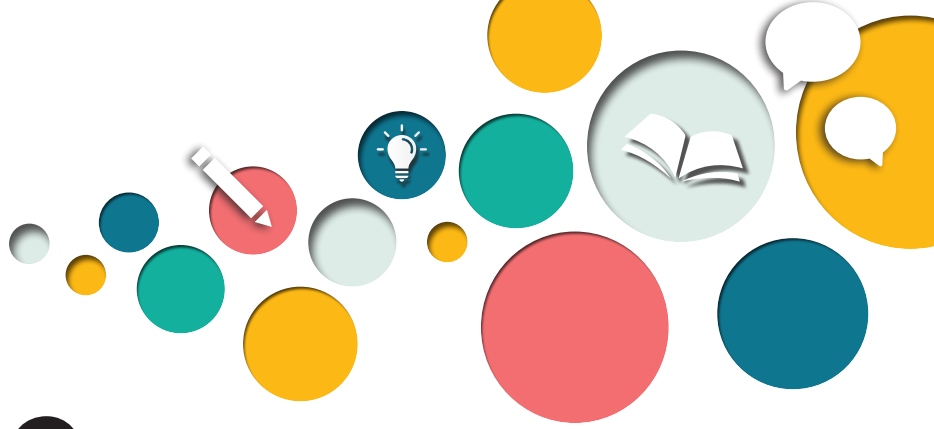
Conclusion

It's our duty to prepare students for the world beyond the classroom. In this digital society, that means cultivating not only "old" literacy skills like reading texts on paper and writing essays by hand, but also "new" skills like interpreting videos and evaluating web sources.

As we teach them to navigate this digital realm, we can also harness its connectivity and resources. Book clubs can expand beyond the school library, and journalism study can move beyond local newspapers. This is the era of connectivity and communication, and that applies to our learning communities, too.

Author Carol Jago stated, "Reading demands that we look outward, beyond the familiar boundaries of our lives." Just as reading expands the limits of our perspective, so too does the internet. So, how can we inspire budding literacy experts today? We teach students to be critical thinkers, close readers, and keen analyzers. Whether they're reading in print or on screens, writing in notebooks or on Chromebooks, children need literacy skills more than ever. It's up to us to teach them and to learn, evolve, and grow with them.





About the Authors

Carol Jago

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Carol Jago has taught English in middle and high schools for 32 years and is now the associate director of the California Reading & Literature Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. She served as president of the National Council of Teachers of English and as chair of the College Board's English Academic Advisory Committee.

She has published several books with Heinemann including *With Rigor for All: Meeting Standards for Reading Literature* and *Cohesive Writing: Why Concept Is Not Enough*. *The Book in Question: Why and How Reading Is in Crisis* will be released fall 2018.

In 2015, Carol was awarded the International Literacy Association's Adolescent Literacy Thought Leader Award and in 2016 the NCTE's Conference on English Leadership's Exemplary Leadership Award. She has been named by the U.S. Department of Education to serve on the National Assessment Governing Board.





Erik Palmer, M.A.

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Erik Palmer is an educational consultant from Denver, Colorado. Prior to becoming a consultant, he had a career in business—as a national sales leader for a prominent commodity brokerage firm and a floor trader on a Chicago commodity exchange—and a career in the classroom, spending 21 years as a teacher of English, math, science, and civics. He was chosen as Teacher of the Year in a prestigious Colorado school district.

As a consultant, Erik shows teachers practical ways to improve students' oral communication and to master listening and speaking standards. Other areas of expertise include teaching media and internet literacy, using technology to enhance instruction and engage students, and developing argument and reasoning skills. Erik also works with adults, helping them become more effective communicators.

Erik is a frequent presenter at conferences, and he has given keynotes and led in-service trainings for schools and districts across the U.S. and around the world. He is the author of *Well-Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students* (Stenhouse Publishers, 2011); *Digitally Speaking: How to Improve Student Presentations with Technology* (Stenhouse, 2012), *Teaching the Core Skills of Listening and Speaking* (ASCD, 2014), *Researching in a Digital World* (ASCD, 2015), *Good Thinking: Teaching Argument, Persuasion, and Reasoning* (Stenhouse, 2016), and *Own Any Occasion: Mastering the Art of Speaking and Presenting* (ATD Press, 2017). He is a program consultant for Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's *Into Reading* and *Into Literature* language arts programs.





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