



# Language Arts Curriculum

## Language Arts Overview

As students travel through their time at The Philadelphia School, their facility with an understanding of language animates their work across the disciplines. Language arts are fundamental in anchoring one's thinking and communicating one's ideas effectively. We weave in language work across the day, so that conversations, vocabulary, and craft become a seamless part of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in all classrooms.

### Reading

To become skilled readers, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Each grade-level or unit curates and maintains a rich common library of fiction and non-fiction that targets the diverse needs and interests of children at that level. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge, as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements, including digital media. By reading texts as part of their thematic and cultural studies, science explorations, and other projects, they build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that gives them the background needed to be fluent readers in all content areas.

Using a workshop model as well as explicit skills instruction in phonics, grammar, and mechanics where appropriate, the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. Two reading specialists provide targeted instruction to individuals and small groups as needed, either by pushing into classrooms during workshop times or in pull-out sessions.

### Writing

The act of writing enhances one's ability to make meaning of experience for oneself and others. Creating text expands thinking, generates knowledge, and shares and communicates understanding. Writing involves effort, risk, and purpose; it takes practice, trial and error, exposure, direct instruction, time, and social support. At The Philadelphia School, we recognize that the strongest writing emerges when students are writing about topics of personal interest or for authentic purpose, and so our program is designed to capitalize on these wherever possible.

Over the course of their time at The Philadelphia School, students learn how to generate writing ideas across topics and genres and become increasingly skillful at crafting a polished final piece. Through participation in writers' workshop and targeted assignments that are woven into thematic work, they learn to appreciate that writing is a recursive process that involves prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Each year, students demonstrate increasing sophistication in all aspects of language use, from the development and organization of ideas to vocabulary, syntax, and mechanics. They develop the ability to write for different audiences and hone their individual writing voice and style in the process.

## **Speaking and Listening**

Speaking and listening have always been critical as tools for learning and communicating. New technologies have now broadened and expanded the role that speaking and listening play in acquiring and sharing knowledge and have tightened their link to other forms of communication. Each day, students take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations — as part of a whole class, in small groups, or with a partner. They learn to contribute accurate, relevant information; respond to and develop what others have said; and analyze and synthesize ideas. Students learn to integrate information from oral, visual, quantitative, and media sources and are encouraged to evaluate what they hear, to use media and visual displays strategically, and to adapt speech to context and task.

## **Early Childhood**

### **Reading**

In preschool and kindergarten, students begin their reading journeys through exposure to books, conversations, storytelling, drawing, pretend play, and other symbolic activities. Our literacy-rich environment creates interest, engagement, and responsiveness: children learn that text can build a bridge to greater understanding of an interesting topic, and that stories can be windows into other worlds, or inspiration for their richest imaginative play. These experiences build crucial foundations for later conventional reading.

We respond to our young students' varied developmental levels, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds, meeting each child where they are on their path to becoming readers. Rich project work allows those with beginning reading skills already in place to practice those skills as they seek to expand their knowledge, while pre-readers are encouraged through exposure, literacy games, and explicit instruction to build new competencies. Students begin to establish an understanding of print, enjoy the pleasure of stories and informational text, and learn about authors. They begin to develop reading habits, form hopes around becoming a reader, and gain beginning foundational literacy skills (phonics and word analysis skills). Students are energized to handle books with confidence, talk about the books they've experienced through read-alouds, develop a working knowledge of concepts of print, build a beginning sight word vocabulary, and gain an understanding of the alphabetic principle and letter/sound correspondence.

### **Writing**

In preschool, students' interest in and ability to use symbols to represent words and ideas is encouraged throughout each day. Students understand that writing is language/speech transcribed. They begin to develop writing habits, form hopes around becoming effective writers, and gain some beginning literacy skills. As they industriously create signs, lists, and notes to enrich their daily play, preschoolers begin to see themselves as inventors of messages that have growing meaning and purpose. Students participate in shared group writing experiences, such as dictating thank-you notes, invitations, story creation, and announcements.

Kindergarteners begin the year knowing that they can and will write often. Through participation in regular writers' workshop, where they create, revise and illustrate books and stories of various genres with independent purpose, they quickly come to see themselves as authors. Periodic writing celebrations



underscore this accomplishment. As part of their play and project work, students also explore using print for a variety of everyday purposes, including letter/card writing, labeling, list making, informational writing, and book making. Phonetic spelling is encouraged, and students begin to use letters to represent the sounds with increasing accuracy. They are introduced to different conventions of writing through shared writing experiences and mini-lessons that are offered during writers' workshop times. Handwriting is also introduced to promote correct letter formation.

## **Speaking and Listening**

The foundation for active listening and effective speaking skills is set in preschool and kindergarten. Students are introduced in preschool to the formalities of conversational speech, discourse, and reciprocal communication. Students learn the conventions of language and strategies for clear, thoughtful and empathetic communication through dramatic play, read alouds, teacher-led conversations, peer discussions, and sharing.

As they move into kindergarten, students continue to work on the skills they need to be focused, calm, and responsive active listeners. They become more aware of the need to listen to and incorporate other's ideas and points of view. They learn to differentiate between questions and comments, between fact and opinion (or fiction), and continue to understand more conventions in spoken language. Our school day is incredibly collaborative and social, allowing for opportunities to both listen and communicate one's own ideas thoughtfully, through morning meeting greetings and sharings, journal writing, advocating ideas for project work, creating dramatic representations of literature, discussing books in both small and large literary circles, and in the constant peer negotiation that goes on during a school day.

## **Primary Unit - Third Grade**

### **Reading**

Using texts as part of thematic studies and in exploration of high-interest genres and authors, our early elementary readers expand their love of reading and learn how reading can enrich their lives. Primary students continue to build foundational reading skills in phonics and word analysis, develop new comprehension strategies, and expand their understanding of fiction and nonfiction text structure. Students' exposure to different genres during readers' workshop and guided independent reading facilitates the goal of reading poetry and prose independently and proficiently. Reading "good-fit" books encourages sight word recognition, an understanding of prosody and expression, and a strong foundation in decoding skills, and thus propels reading fluency.

Following this work, third grade reading is about empowering students to become avid readers and develop a sense of agency about their own reading. As they continue to build fluency and skill as readers, students engage in rich thematic studies that prompt more reading to learn. Through demonstration and supported practice in workshop mini-lessons, children are exposed to high-interest books they can choose and read independently. Instruction in the process and skills of proficient reading such as stamina, fluency, monitoring for sense, comprehension, prediction, retelling, vocabulary, and connections within and across texts targets students' specific strengths and needs.

## **Writing**

Primary students are able to write with greater skill and independence; their increasing phonemic awareness and growing repertoire of writing skills and strategies mean that they are also coming closer to capturing on the page stories that flow so effortlessly from their minds and mouths. They see themselves as authors who can get ideas across to others through writing. They are ready to tackle new challenges and to write with greater intent and meaning, and they begin to understand the value in revising and polishing a piece with the reader's needs in mind. Students will be able to write independently by the end of second grade, writing phonetically but moving towards conventional spelling, and using conventions of writing to support meaning more consistently.

In third grade we capitalize on this newfound confidence to underscore that students' lives and their thoughts are worth writing about. Skills and mechanics of writing build within and across genres (narrative, informational, persuasive, and poetic) through practicing strategies for generating ideas, planning in outlines, increasing writing volume, writing different leads and endings, and revising. Students write across all disciplines, considering the task, purpose, and audience for their writing, developing their unique "writer's voice". The mechanics of writing become increasingly important as students become more effective and sophisticated writers. Cursive handwriting instruction is introduced in third grade.

## **Speaking and Listening**

Engaging in oral dialogue with diverse partners in small and large groups across the disciplines, primary students expand their expressive and receptive communication skills through increasingly sophisticated conversations. Morning and Closing meetings, Responsive Classroom activities, and targeted small group discussions provide carefully scaffolded opportunities to hone strategies for clear and respectful communication. Collaborative projects give students opportunities to practice active listening and interpersonal skills. Learning celebrations and other public events serve as platforms for students to present their work clearly and confidently.

In order to ground their learning and become confident communicators, third grade students have further opportunities to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations — as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with a partner. Being productive members of these conversations requires that students contribute accurate, relevant information; respond to and develop what others have said; make comparisons and contrasts; and analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in various domains. Through their thematic studies, third grade students also practice oral communication skills as they prepare for learning celebrations and the third grade play, which they write and perform collaboratively with their peers.

## **Junior Unit**

### **Reading**

In Junior Unit, fourth and fifth grade students actively engage in reading to learn as opposed to learning to read, while continuing to enhance their reading lives by choosing "just-right" books for pleasure. They read with increased stamina, focus and engagement, using independent reading time effectively. They develop



deep, personal engagement with books and extend the variety of genres and media they read in an appropriate manner.

Across the disciplines, junior unit students use a variety of media to collect information, compare and contrast points of view, and understand complex historical, scientific, and mathematical concepts. Texts chosen to support the fourth and fifth grade thematic curriculum not only enhance an understanding of cultures studied and their history, but allow for students' continued growth as readers of nonfiction. Students use foundational reading skills to enhance the study of word origins, and apply word knowledge and comprehension strategies such as summarizing, questioning, and connecting, to the reading of anthologies, non-fiction texts, fiction, and primary and secondary source materials in support of their thematic explorations. Readers become increasingly skilled in distinguishing between explicit meaning and inference, in building content-specific vocabulary, and in connecting learning across the disciplines.

## **Writing**

In fourth and fifth grades, students become increasingly adept at writing to communicate their ideas across content areas with precision and organization. Writing assignments are integrated with projects across the curriculum. Students respond to literature, report scientific observations and support claims with evidence, craft effective and powerful personal narratives, and develop short and extended works of nonfiction. Strategies for efficient note-taking support learning in science and theme. Students edit their own writing and the writing of their peers for clarity, structure, and mechanics. Weekly spelling and vocabulary instruction supports students' ability to express themselves precisely and vividly, and students build keyboarding skills to foster efficient written communication. They maintain a writer's notebook to encourage thoughtful reflection and regular writing.

## **Speaking and Listening**

In fourth and fifth grades students are expected to be engaged citizens in the classroom learning community and employ active listening skills and thoughtful, civil discourse in classroom discussion, group work, and individual conversations. Students are encouraged to build on, support, or respectfully disagree with others' ideas, to express their own ideas clearly, and to use examples and evidence to support opinions. Students prepare for discussions by reading, writing, or talking with others and pose and respond to questions that contribute to the discussion and reference others' ideas. Using verbal and nonverbal signals to demonstrate attention, comprehension, and synthesis of ideas in group discussions is encouraged.

## **Middle School**

### **Reading**

Sixth grade reading is about working harder, longer, and deeper. Students are building their reading lives to help them understand themselves and the world around them. They read in greater volume to build their stamina, fluency, and comprehension of increasingly complex texts. They read across genres, cultures, and centuries to gain an understanding of multicultural, political, and economic geographies. They begin to construct an appreciation for the human condition and build profound insights that serve as models for their own thinking. Students begin to appreciate that in books, as well as in life, we can watch how people act,

noticing especially how they respond to events and how those experiences can shape their decisions and world view. Students engage with reading strategies, build rich vocabulary, and cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as note inferences drawn from the text. Content words become important to the understanding of thematic topics and issues. Throughout the year, students will engage in essential questions through the fiction and nonfiction texts they read, using these different works as lenses to analyze and explore their own identities.

Using primarily American texts, seventh grade students explore questions of time, place, and perspective in literature and non-fiction. A variety of critical analysis approaches are explicitly taught in an effort to move students towards a more nuanced and layered understanding of text. Integrated into thematic units, genre studies serve to expand student understanding of how universal themes are presented differently. Students are exposed to books at their instructional level and sometimes beyond in an effort to stretch their ability to engage in difficult reading constructively; essential questions guide these experiences. In addition, students develop their young adult reading personality, identifying good fit books through a social and personal exploration of texts outside the formal literature curriculum.

Eighth grade students use literature and informational texts (both primary and secondary sources) to better understand historical, scientific, and literary ideas and processes. They learn to move from narrow to broad in their thinking and to analyze how the past influences and shapes the present and future. Through interaction with a variety of texts, students learn how to reconstruct the past, which allows them to develop a historical perspective and to answer essential questions about the challenges and responsibilities of citizenship in the 21st century. Reading for pleasure continues to be fostered as students build a rich and varied reading life. Media literacy becomes an ever more essential understanding as students navigate the power of language in the creation of knowledge and culture

## **Writing**

Writing instruction in sixth grade is geared towards more nuanced, complicated storytelling, with a more reflective stance and more use of figurative language and literary techniques. The skills of telling their own stories and narrative writing helps adolescents make sense of their lives. They begin to zoom in on a tight time frame, creating a story arc of tension and using a repertoire of dialogue, action, and inner thinking. Students generate meaningful story ideas quickly and craft entries based on qualities of narrative writing through use of mentor texts. They work on planning and drafting to lift the level of their writing through the use of story structure to convey meaning. This emphasis on multiple drafts helps to develop a repertoire of writing skills. Just as scientists rely on the scientific process whenever they are investigating anything, so, too, writers rely on the writing process. Students learn to set goals for themselves and then choose the writing strategy that will help them achieve those goals.

Through ongoing and varied writing experiences, students in the seventh grade develop a personal writing style that will support the increasingly complex demands of upper middle school writing expectations. Using the writer's workshop model, students write across genres, on topics both self-selected and prompted by the curriculum. Students write often, moving through the writing process to varying degrees and with varying support over time; they reflect on the practices that support their best writing and select the best pieces for publishing. Individual feedback and writing goals provide students, at various levels of sophistication, with their next steps. As the year progresses, students learn that both fiction and nonfiction writing can put forth



important ideas, transform readers' understandings, and appeal to the universal truths that connect all people.

Students in eighth grade write across the disciplines with increased purpose and ability as they tackle the increasing demands of preparing for high school. They become increasingly more adept at writing in a number of genres, organizing and clarifying their ideas, using the writing process more effectively and independently, while attending more closely to the mechanics of writing. Projects in cultural studies, language arts, science, and Spanish require written work of increasing sophistication, and rubrics guide students towards improving the focus, style, content, organization, and mechanics of their written work. Using a variety of media and technology to create content, to collaborate on projects, and to produce finished is stressed.

### **Speaking and Listening**

Speaking and listening are critical as tools for learning and communicating. Oral communication provides the basis of language development, thinking, gathering information, and shaping how we see ourselves and how others see us. Students continue to work on becoming more attentive and empathetic listeners, more clear and effective speakers, and more attuned to the academic and social skills needed to be collaborative group members. Using a variety of media and technology allows students to present themselves and their work in ever more sophisticated ways.

As learners in a diverse and scholarly community, seventh graders learn the techniques of listening and building understanding through listening and speaking experiences and activities both inside the school building and in our city and country classrooms. Students learn to be presenters of specific ideas with well-supported evidence, to be engaged participants in meaningful collaborative work, and to be active listeners who connect new experiences to prior knowledge.

Speaking and listening are critical as tools for learning and communicating. Oral communication provides the basis of language development, thinking, gathering information, and shaping how we see ourselves and how others see us. Studies show that over eighty percent of communication is spent in speaking and listening, which lends credence to the belief that teaching these skills is not just desirable, but critical. By the end of the year (as reflected in graduation speeches), students are expected to self-confidently and effectively present themselves to a variety of audiences.