AVRCE Middle Level Literacy

April Newsletter

April 3, 2023



Grade 8 teachers from BDS, MRHS, and PRMS working together on Thursday, March 30th.

Extending Thanks

Welcome back to the first newsletter I've put together in a few months–things have been busy! Last week, I had the opportunity to meet with most Grade 8 ELA teachers from around the region to discuss the steps they are taking ahead of the RWM8 to prepare this particular cohort of students who have never written a provincial assessment. I've shared the following with a few of you this week, but I think it is worth

writing here to the larger audience: At every turn this year, I have been impressed with your conversations, the experience and expertise you bring to your roles, the professionalism with which we've interacted, the questions you ask me and each other, and your willingness and openness to share with your colleagues; it has been my absolute privilege this year to work with and for you all, in service to your students, and the sessions last week were no exception. The purpose of this newsletter is to summarize the information that was shared last week, particularly the excellent points that were raised in each session by the teachers in attendance. Even if you do not teach Grade 8, I encourage you to keep reading; preparing for RWM8 doesn't begin and end in Grade 8, but is, rather, an accumulation of learning experiences over time. Knowing that our students will, whether we like it or not, see these assessments periodically throughout their school careers can help us to reflect on our programs and consider certain building blocks that we want to lay in place for our students throughout their three middle level years. I have also tried to incorporate the bigger "why" behind many of these goals; in other words, why are these goals important for students in their other subjects and in their lives, not just for the purpose of a provincial assessment?

What are some things I should be thinking about before the assessment (and beyond)?

Last week, I shared three broad goals that ELA teachers can be thinking about over the next six weeks until the assessment. On top of that, other teachers have added important specific areas of need that they have discovered and addressed with their students. Below each bullet point, you will also see the *text change* to indicate why I would still be thinking about these goals, even if my students were not preparing to write a provincial assessment.

- **Ensure students are familiar with selected response questions that ask them to think literally, non-literally, and analytically.** Historically, it is the analysis questions that pose the most challenge for our students in both literacy and math, and selected response questions can be tricky for students who are not familiar with the format. We can use that knowledge to think about the types of questions we are posing to our students and where we focus our explicit reading instruction. Teaching students how to eliminate distractors when approaching a selected response question is an important piece of this puzzle.

If we think of this outside of the provincial assessment and even outside of Grade 8, this is still an important consideration. First, our students will certainly encounter this question format in high school, post-secondary, and across subject areas. Beyond the format of the question, though, can our students "read" a range of media literally, non-literally, and analytically? In our world, we are bombarded with so much information each day, and we see around us the impact of people not being able to critically analyze the media they encounter. This is especially true for our students, who have never known anything different. For those who struggle to access text, do they know how to use appropriate assistive technologies and are they expected to use them to achieve grade level or individualized outcomes? Are they receiving targeted literacy intervention?

- **Ensure students have had the opportunity to analyze short stories, poems, and a range of other media (e.g. editorial cartoons).** This is not to say that our middle level ELA courses should *only* be reflective of those genres; balancing fiction and non-fiction genres is important as we teach students to read widely, to read for information, and to determine bias and validity of a range of sources. However, if you happen to be someone who avoids poetry, for example (and I can sheepishly point my own finger squarely at myself here!), it is worth noting that students will, undoubtedly, need to be equipped with some of that knowledge. Fortunately, poetry and short story analysis can be woven throughout other areas of study, as well. For example, Rita Joe's "I Lost My Talk" or Chief Dan George's "And My Heart Soars" would be wonderful additions to a Social Studies lesson.
  Reading broadly enhances our students' vocabulary, their understanding of literary devices and common turns of phrase, their knowledge of history, science, and the human experience, and gives them a stronger foundation from which to analyze for validity, reliability, and bias. Offering regular opportunities for students to engage (and grapple) with a range of texts is one of the most important things we do. We should also not devalue or underestimate the power of reading to our students.
- **Ensure students know how to plan a multi-paragraph written composition.** Knowing my own students in the past, this would be my priority area of focus. The majority of students (and adults) do not enjoy planning; however, it is planning that will result in an organized essay or narrative. Therefore, ensuring students know how to structure a plan in response to a prompt is a worthy goal. Exemplars of past student writing are available in the Lessons Learned document. When the assessment is scored, points can be awarded when evidence of a solid plan is in place, even if a student's written piece is

incomplete. Another important note is that the use of appropriate transition words can mean the difference between a 2 and 3 in Organization when writing is scored. A comprehensive list of appropriate transition words by grade can be found at the end of the Grade 8 Lessons Learned document (Appendix H, pp. 64-66).

Beyond the realm of the provincial assessment, those are simply skills (I would even argue life skills) that we want our students to demonstrate: Can they plan and execute an age-appropriate piece of writing for a variety of purposes? Using exemplars of student work, accompanied by plenty of modeling, is an effective way to see improvements in student writing in a relatively short amount of time.

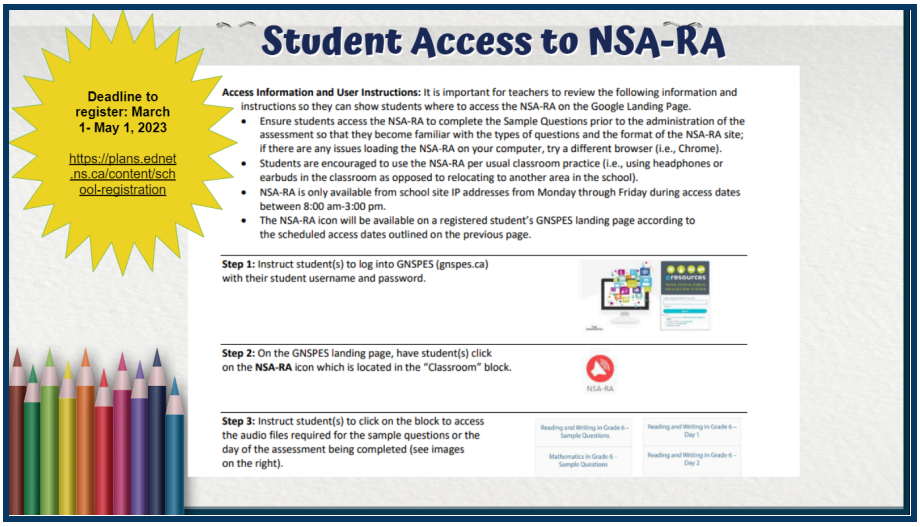


Specific to the provincial assessment, other important points brought up by teachers this week included the following:

- Checking in on students' comfort levels with a print (non-digital) dictionary and thesaurus.
- Encourage students to take the risk of using higher-level, "vivid" vocabulary words, even if they are uncertain of the spelling; this can have a positive impact on their score in Language Use.
- Spelling a word incorrectly multiple times counts as a single error; likewise, improper punctuation or capitalization results in only one error.

- Monitor and encourage students to skip questions they don't know and return to them later. Reviewing this with students in advance is helpful.
- Length of written pieces does not automatically translate to higher or lower scores (as we know, quantity does not always equal quality!).
- Reviewing the Analytic Writing Rubric with students in advance of the assessment, just as we would review our rubrics before assigning a project or piece of writing with our students, is good practice.
- Ensuring students are familiar with line numbers when they see them in a text.

Adaptations and the Digital Read Aloud



For students who (1) have Documented Adaptations on file in TIENET, and (2) are using them in the classroom, there are several options available for the provincial assessment. First, students who require the assessment to be read aloud to them can either have a human reader or be registered to receive a digital read aloud version of the assessment. By Grade 8, it would be preferable for students to use the digital read aloud, as it affords them a greater level of independence. However, it's important to consider your individual students and what they are most familiar with at this point in the year; any assistive technology used for the provincial assessment should be familiar to the student and regularly used in the classroom. It is not necessary to pre-register for a human reader.

Students requiring the digital read aloud need to be registered between March 1st and May 1st at https://plans.ednet.ns.ca/content/school-registration. An audio version of the assessment will be downloaded to their GNSPES launch page. They will

also have access to digital versions of practice questions in advance of the assessment. Students only need to be registered once to have access to digital read aloud versions for both literacy and math.

For more information about adaptations, please see the Information Guide, pp. 6-11.

Notes about the Writing Prompt

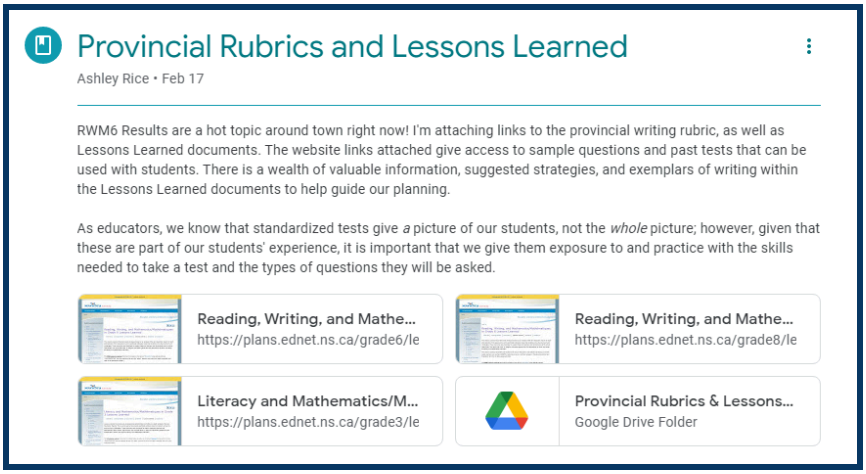
An excellent part of the discussions last week revolved around the nature of the writing prompt. Students will be assessed according to the Analytic Writing Rubric (see also: Writing Performance Levels). They are not, however, assessed on their adherence to the prompt. This means that, if a student is struggling to generate writing during the assessment, they are able to switch prompts and write about another prompt or topic without penalty. The general consensus among teachers was that this might not be information we necessarily make available to a full class; however, it could make all the difference in the world for some of our students.

A second note is that teachers are able to lead a short discussion with their class before students begin writing. Alternatively, students can have time with a partner to discuss before beginning their writing. This would be about 3-5 minutes in total. An excellent point raised by teachers this week is the benefit of having the ELA teacher be the one to lead that pre-writing discussion. Schools and teachers have been creative in finding ways to make this happen when their class is with another teacher; solutions have included:

- Scheduling a “staggered start” of the writing portion of the assessment so that the ELA teacher has time to lead the pre-writing discussion with each of their classes.
- Using Google Meet to “zoom in” to another classroom to lead the discussion.
- Switching rooms briefly with another teacher to lead the discussion (possible in teaming situations where classes are likely next door or nearby).

More information about the writing portion of the assessment (and other details related to administering the assessment) can be found in the Administration Guide.

Resources



As always, I have done my best to curate useful resources into one, easily accessible location in the Google Classroom. You can find the post with all relevant documents and resources here, and in the email I sent to which this newsletter was attached. There is also a growing collection of teacher-created practice resources available in the folder Resources to Support Assessment Prep. For many of those, I owe a big thank you to Patricia Kasapowitsch, a Grade 8 teacher at PRMS. If you have other useful activities that you use with your students and you would like to share them, please forward them along to me and I will add them to our folder.

A Final Note

I would be remiss if I didn't address the misgivings that many of us feel about these types of standardized tests. Even though it is aligned with the curriculum we teach and the skills we would hope to instill in our students, the formality of a standardized test can feel anxiety-inducing and at odds with what we do on a daily basis with an inquiry-based curriculum, universally-designed planning, outcomes-based formative and summative assessments, and student-centered learning. While we may dislike the experience and the format, though, we also know that the assessment is unlikely to go away, and having common benchmarks for our students is not an unworthy goal; in fact, it is a common practice in most educational jurisdictions around the world. So, in reconciling those complex feelings, I have found that it is helpful to

remind myself that our day-to-day teaching and the experience of a provincial assessment do not have to be mutually exclusive: We can use inquiry-based learning *and* explicit instruction in our classrooms. We can use balanced formative and summative assessments, including observations and conversations, *and* still use quizzes and tests as a means of assessment (most of our students will need to write exams as part of their high school experience!). We can offer a variety of ways for students to represent learning *and* still expect our students to be able to write, with proper instruction and support. We can use a range of UDL strategies in our classrooms *and* expect students to acquire an increased stamina for independent work over time. We cannot control the design of the test or our students' performance on a certain day, but in a well-rounded literacy classroom that is aligned with the curriculum, we can be confident that we are doing everything within our power to ensure that our students are prepared for any assessment, including the real-world applications of their literacy skills that they will encounter.

Contact

Ashley Rice
Student Centred-Literacy Coach (Grades 6-8)
ashleyrice@gnspes.ca OR ashley.rice@avrce.ca
Google Classroom: AVRCE Middle Level Literacy
Code: o3jusim
Request Form:
https://forms.gle/P5Se9Nn8b83kRThR7



There are TWO monthly newsletters left for this year! What would you like to see? Feel free to send me your requests (ashley.rice@avrce.ca or ashleyrice@gnspes.ca).

Please do not hit "Reply" on the email you received containing this newsletter, as it is a "no-reply" and will not reach me!