

**Facilitating Academic Literacy  
in English**

**Working Group on  
Academic Literacy in English**

**Gateway Education Programme  
Committee**

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### **What is “literacy” and “academic literacy”?**

Language is needed to understand a text and needs to be correctly used to express one’s understanding. Without proper expression in language, persons from different areas of life will not be able to understand what someone means.

Literacy refers to the practices of reading texts, and talking and writing about them. Academic literacy means acquiring knowledge from texts in academic disciplines, expressing understanding of them, and using higher order cognitive processes with them like critical thinking, synthesis, reflection, etc.

### **How does it apply to Gateway Education (GE) courses?**

Academic literacy is fundamental to students’ success as undergraduates. When students develop academic literacy through a GE course, they gain knowledge and can properly express it in language. Academic literacy also fits into Outcome Based Teaching and Learning by covering a range of cognitive processes.

Helping students develop academic literacy is a vital part of what we are expected to do at CityU, where English is the language of instruction and assessment. Most GE courses have intended learning outcomes which are related to oral skills and fluent and correct text production in English. Furthermore, employers in Hong Kong list spoken and written English within the top skills they want to see in employees. Colleagues can participate as much or as little as they want for this initiative.

### **How can I get started?**

There is a well-developed body of knowledge on academic literacy. The techniques presented here should help you get you started. Hopefully you may find some useful to facilitate academic literacy. Participation by colleagues is completely voluntary.

### **Will it make any difference?**

Students who can express themselves in the language of their disciplines are at an advantage in their studies and their careers. CityU can also gain further recognition for the quality of its graduates.

Making small changes can have positive effects. Observing those effects and refining the techniques, one can build up a range of ways which should make a difference in helping our students along the road of academic literacy. Some can be used in tandem – try them if you like.

### **What support can I get?**

This booklet contains some techniques which can be used in GE courses. They require no changes to your course outline or structure but can help students develop their academic literacy. The techniques are student centered: some can be done in the class while others can be done by students outside class as part of their normal study activities.

Interested teachers will also be encouraged to come to informal gatherings to share their experience in using these techniques to develop academic literacy and in sharing additional ones which they have developed.

### Techniques to Promote Academic Literacy in English

Technique	Where/ How it is done	Rationale
1. Pair / Share	<p>In class</p> <p>Students are given a question or a few questions to discuss with a partner.</p> <p>After 1 – 3 minutes, a few pairs are asked to report to the whole class.</p>	<p>Students rehearse academic talk; they get vocabulary and grammatical structures they need from each other and surrounding students.</p> <p>Students check and review their own understanding of content; ideas and language generated can be used by students in writing tasks.</p> <p>Students can improve fluency, accuracy, and confidence in spoken English.</p>
2. Free / Spontaneous Writing	<p>In class / Out of class</p> <p>Students are given a prompt (question, image, etc.) and must write for 4 – 8 minutes. If they cannot write on the prompt, they must still write, even if it is “I cannot think of anything about X”.</p>	<p>Spontaneous writing on a topic without attention to grammar or organization can help students express their ideas fluently.</p> <p>Helps to automatize their skill in thinking in English.</p> <p>Can also generate ideas for assessed written tasks.</p>
3. Concise paraphrasing of assigned readings / outlines of readings	<p>Out of class; can also be done in class</p> <p>Students read a page, a chapter, or an article and paraphrase the main points in 1 – 3 paragraphs.</p> <p>Students are told that they must use their own words – only 1 or 2 short quotations are allowed</p>	<p>By summarizing in their own words, students must 1) master the content 2) express it in their own voice with appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures.</p> <p>To decide what are the most important points, students develop higher order skills like evaluation.</p> <p>Paragraphs can also be used for discussion activities.</p> <p>Outlining readings well in advance in preparing presentations is especially effective for developing students’ literacy.</p>
4. Discussion questions on assigned readings / outlines of readings	<p>Out of class</p> <p>Students prepare answers to questions on reading / send tutor outlines of readings they have done for presentations</p>	<p>Requires students to try to understand material; provides opportunity for formative assessment by teacher on both content and language</p>

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5. Mini-glossaries	In class  Include mini-glossaries on PowerPoint slides	"Just-in-time" learning of new vocabulary