How to Teach Reading and Writing Outside a Traditional Classroom

A Guide to Distance Instruction for Literacy Development for Schools and Families



National Center on Improving Literacy

The research reported here is a grant to the National Center on Improving Literacy from the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, in partnership with the Office of Special Education Programs (Award #: H283D210004). The opinions or policies expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of OEESE, OSEP, or the U.S. Department of Education. You should not assume endorsement by the Federal government. Copyright © 2026 National Center on Improving Literacy.

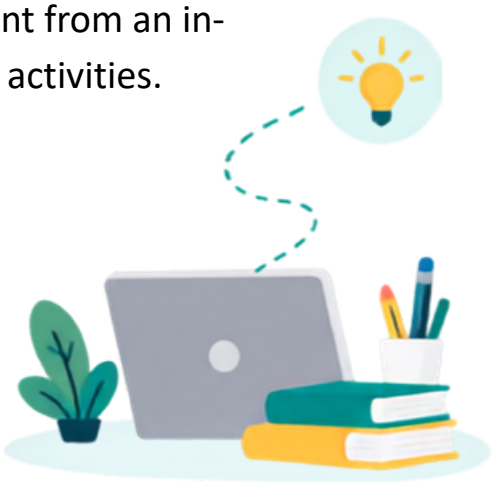
Teaching literacy skills in distance learning environments uses many of the same methods and principles as in-person instruction, but there are key differences that both educators and families should understand. When learning happens at home, clear responsibilities, realistic expectations, and ongoing communication become essential.

This guide focuses on instruction that takes place outside a school building: homeschooling, virtual schools, hybrid programs, and other remote or at-home learning arrangements. Educators, caregivers, and families all play important parts, and those roles may look different depending on the setting.

How It Works

When teaching literacy skills outside a classroom, responsibility for instruction does not disappear; it shifts. In virtual or remote school programs, educators plan, deliver, and monitor literacy instruction. In homeschooling settings, families take on many or all instructional responsibilities. In hybrid or shared models, schools and families divide these responsibilities based on the instructional design and the student's needs. Across all settings, effective literacy instruction must remain evidence-based, accessible, and realistic for implementation in the home.

This approach typically combines intentional instruction, supported practice, and independent student work. It often looks different from an in-person school day and may involve a mix of online and offline activities.



- Instruction may occur through live lessons, recorded lessons, print materials, digital tools, or a combination of formats.
- Offline literacy experiences (reading print books, writing by hand, talking about text) remain essential and should be balanced with digital activities.
- It may include a range of text types and topics, incorporating nonfiction and informational texts related to science, social studies, or real-world topics as a way to support reading instruction while building background knowledge.
- Consistency and clarity matter more than replicating a full school-day schedule.

Effective distance instruction for literacy development relies on a few core principles:

- Instruction should be evidence-based, explicit, and systematic, especially in foundational literacy skills.
- Goals and expectations should be clear so everyone understands what students are working toward.
- Interaction matters. Students benefit from opportunities to talk, respond, ask questions, and receive feedback.
- "Scaffolds" should be built in. Scaffolds are temporary supports, such as prompts, models, checklists, or sentence starters that help students succeed with tasks they cannot yet do independently. These supports should fade over time as students gain confidence and skill.
- Technology should enhance instruction, not replace it.
- Instruction should be accessible and flexible enough to work in home environments with different schedules, resources, and needs.
- Progress should be monitored regularly so instruction and support can be adjusted.



How Educators Support Literacy Instruction Outside the Classroom

Educators play a central role in supporting literacy instruction outside the classroom, from planning instruction and selecting materials to maintaining communication and ensuring students receive additional support when needed.

Here's how educators can help students, and the families that support them, successfully learn and practice literacy skills at home:

1 **Provide clear, usable materials and routines so that students and families know exactly what to use, what to do, and when to do it.**

- Supply all materials needed for literacy instruction in formats families can realistically access, such as a short list of required books, printable pages, writing tools, or specific digital links.
- Clearly distinguish between required materials and optional extensions, so families are not guessing what is essential.
- Write directions in plain language that explain what students are expected to do, how long an activity should take, and what to do when a student gets stuck.
- Share examples or models of completed work (photos, short videos, or sample responses), so families and students can see what "done" looks like.
- Help families establish predictable routines, such as "read for 20 minutes daily," "write twice a week," or "check in every Friday," so families can plan and students know what to expect.

2 Design instruction for access, fairness, and appropriate rigor.

- Use evidence-based literacy practices, including explicit instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Differentiate, modify, and accommodate instruction based on student needs.
- Apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to provide multiple ways to access instruction and demonstrate understanding.
- Consider whether instruction meets the needs of the most vulnerable students while maintaining appropriate rigor.

3 Maintain interventions and disability-related services.

- Continue literacy interventions during distance instruction for students who receive them.
- Adapt specialized instruction as needed, such as small-group video sessions, recorded lessons, or check-ins.
- Ensure instruction aligns with each student's IEP or service plan.
- Communicate clearly with families about how these interventions will be delivered and supported.

4 Use technology purposefully.

- Select digital tools based on instructional purpose, not novelty.
- Avoid frequent platform changes.
- Ensure tools are compatible with assistive technology.
- Introduce and explain tools before students are expected to complete graded work.
- Provide professional learning that includes time to practice, access to equipment, relevant expertise, and ongoing follow-up support.

5 Communicate consistently with families.

- Use communication methods that align with family access and preferences.
- Offer regular opportunities for questions and feedback.
- Set regular office hours when possible.
- Avoid using education jargon or define terms clearly when needed.

6 Build interaction and engagement into instruction.

- Build in regular opportunities for student discussion and interaction to strengthen language development, comprehension, and active engagement with text.
- Break up the day with movement breaks or short interactive activities to support attention, participation, and sustained engagement during instruction.
- Design instruction to be interactive by providing feedback, encouraging discussion, and creating opportunities for students to use language, rather than relying on content exposure alone.

How Families Support Literacy Instruction at Home

The role of families is to support reading and writing development, not to replicate a classroom. In homeschooling settings, families may take on many or all instructional responsibilities. In other distance instruction settings, families play a critical role in reinforcing literacy instruction provided by schools.



Here are concrete ways families can foster literacy development at home across different instructional settings:

1 Get the right supports in place.

- Gather the required teaching materials such as free or low-cost books, print resources, and writing tools.
- Access the required technology, such as your school's learning management system, along with basic instructions on how to use it.
- Locate how to reach your child's educators or instructional providers for support, such as one-on-one help, tutoring, or check-ins.

2 Create routines and a workable learning environment.

- Designate a specific spot for practicing literacy skills with books, paper, pencils, and materials provided by your child's educator.
- Reduce distractions.
- Follow a regular teaching and practice routine that fits your household schedule.
- Build in breaks and movement throughout the day to help your child stay focused and engaged.

3 Encourage and motivate.

- Focus on short, manageable routines (for example, 10–15 minutes of reading or a brief writing task), and gradually increase time or complexity as your child becomes more confident.
- Allow your child time to attempt reading or writing tasks independently before stepping in, offering a hint or prompt only when they are truly stuck.
- Acknowledge effort and progress by noticing specific behaviors (for example, "You were stuck on that word, but you figured it out," or "Your writing has more details than last time").

4 Foster comprehension through conversation.

- Choose an appropriate book or text and have your child read aloud while you follow along.
- Ask open-ended questions before, during, and after reading.
- Talk about what was read or watched to promote comprehension and understanding.

5 Connect reading and writing to everyday activities and topics. Real-world practice helps students develop skills in meaningful, motivating ways.

- Involve your child in everyday reading and writing activities that naturally occur in daily life, such as grocery lists, to-do lists, notes, labels, instructions, menus, text messages, signs, or schedules.
- Choose reading materials and writing topics connected to your child's interests, whether that's animals, sports, hobbies, stories, or current events.
- Encourage writing for real purposes, such as making lists, writing notes or messages, creating captions, keeping a simple journal, or completing short projects connected to daily life.
- Talk with your child about what they read or watch, including books, articles, or videos, and make simple comparisons when relevant (for example, comparing a book and its movie version).

6 **Partner and communicate with instructional providers regularly. Clear communication improves instruction and prevents small issues from becoming bigger problems.**

- Use the communication channels your school or instructional provider has set up, such as email, messaging systems, or the learning platform, to stay informed and ask questions.
- Attend teacher office hours, check-ins, or scheduled meetings to clarify expectations, understand goals, and discuss progress.
- Share feedback about what's working and what's not, especially if materials, schedules, or expectations feel unrealistic.
- Ask for clarification when instructions are unclear, rather than trying to guess or push through confusion.
- Reach out for additional support when needed, including one-on-one help, tutoring, or referrals to community or family support resources.
- If you look for additional literacy resources on your own, choose materials that align with your child's instruction and check with the educator or instructional provider before using them regularly. Look for evidence-based resources that clearly explain what skill is being taught, and avoid programs that conflict with or replace assigned instruction.

Final Thoughts

Literacy instruction outside the classroom works best when responsibilities are clear, expectations are realistic, and communication is ongoing. Students make progress when instruction is explicit, practice is regular, and routines support the development of reading and writing skills.