

Language in Context

Accomplished English language arts teachers recognize and value the diversity of language forms in the United States and know that dialects are richly expressive communicative tools. Teachers realize that each student speaks with a dialect that reflects a particular regional upbringing, ethnicity, occupation, age, and socioeconomic class, and teachers continually affirm their students' entitlement to and pride in the variations of English that they and their communities employ. At the same time, accomplished teachers know that effective use of Standard English not

only facilitates oral and written communication, but also creates greater access to the economic, political, and academic advantages of society. Therefore, teachers strategically integrate the rules of grammar and usage in the language arts curriculum by showing students how to apply conventions in formal writing and speaking.

Accomplished English language arts teachers recognize that early adolescents and young adults who use a nondominant dialect frequently experience anxiety when asked to speak and write according to the more broadly accepted language conventions; students may view complying with this request as a relinquishment of their cultural identity. Teachers therefore proceed sensitively, respecting the integrity and value of their students' home or group languages while modeling and teaching the formal conventions of English. Accomplished teachers may initially focus more on written rather than spoken language when teaching standard conventions. They know when and when not to emphasize error correction to encourage risk taking, promote a positive attitude toward learning, and facilitate students' engagement in classroom discussions. In essence, accomplished English language arts teachers do not try to eradicate dialectal variation from their learning environments; rather, they seek to expand their students' range of communicative competencies. (See [Standard VII—Speaking and Listening](#).)

Accomplished English language arts teachers explain the necessity of reading the situation in which one is communicating, and they model how to select the language that suits the context. For example, a teacher might explain that it would be appropriate to employ formal language when receiving an award from a community group, persuading the school board to change the dress code, or emailing an authority figure. However, it would be acceptable to use less formal English when writing or speaking to family and friends.

Accomplished English language arts teachers expose students to many regional and global variations of English. They seek out texts that demonstrate variations in vocabulary and dialect and analyze how these differences lend authenticity and local color to the text. For example, a teacher might have students explore the way that the language used in the works of Sharon Draper, Junot Díaz, or Willa Cather conveys a sense of place and culture. Accomplished teachers may also explore fictional dialects such as those created for *The Hobbit* or *Star Trek* to examine the stereotypes and character traits that variations in speech can suggest.

Accomplished English language arts teachers discuss the emotional impact of language. For example, teachers help students see how words can cause harm to others, sometimes unintentionally. Accomplished teachers urge students to use language carefully across all contexts, from formal papers to text messages. Teachers help students understand the results, including legal consequences, of the careless or immature use of language. Teachers model for students the use of unbiased language such as gender-neutral terminology and demonstrate how to harness the power of language to effect positive change in the world. Students of accomplished teachers see language as a tool, one that can help them not only communicate fairly,

but also advocate for themselves, for others, and for their beliefs. (See [Standard II—Fairness, Equity, and Diversity](#) and [Standard XII—Advocacy](#).)

Accomplished English language arts teachers deliberately point out examples of how and why authors use formal, informal, and inflammatory language, discussing the reasons behind these choices. For example, the characters in *The Outsiders* speak in language that some audiences find objectionable, but an accomplished teacher would sensitively point out that this language is used in the novel to convey character.