

The Importance of Teaching Academic Discourse in School



Our technology-driven world changes rapidly, and this means, as Abraham Lincoln put it, that “we must think anew and act anew.”¹ Being able to “think anew” starts when students learn to use academic discourse.

Academic discourse is a way of bringing together the knowledge of everyone in the room. It is not like a debate where ideas compete with each other to see which wins. Instead, it establishes a structure that helps people build on each other’s ideas.

This ability to collaborate is why teaching academic discourse in the schools is so important. It gives everyone, no matter their background, a similar “language” to build knowledge with. Jeff Zwiers, one of the leading researchers on academic discourse, says that its four basics are:

1. Clarifying and Elaborating²

- “Can you give me an example of what you mean by ...?”
- “When you say ..., do you mean ...?”

2. Building on Ideas³

- “I want to build on your idea about ...”
- “That connects to what I was thinking about ...”



3. Challenging with Evidence⁴

- “I see it differently because the evidence shows ...”
- “I respectfully disagree with ... because in the text it says ...”

4. Synthesizing⁵

- “So what I’m hearing is that we have two main ideas ...”
- “Taking all of our ideas together, it appears that ...”

These strategies help people anchor the conversation in evidence and create new ideas from various perspectives.

The specific rules of academic discourse vary from subject to subject. For example, the rules of scientific discourse are different from the rules of historical discourse. Zwiers says that we can see the rules of these different discourses when we look at their language patterns. For example, in science, some language patterns include:

- “Based on the data, we can conclude that ...”
- “The evidence suggests ... however, additional research is needed to ...”
- “One limitation of this study is ...”

These language patterns show that scientific discourse values evidence and is always trying to be aware of what it doesn’t know.

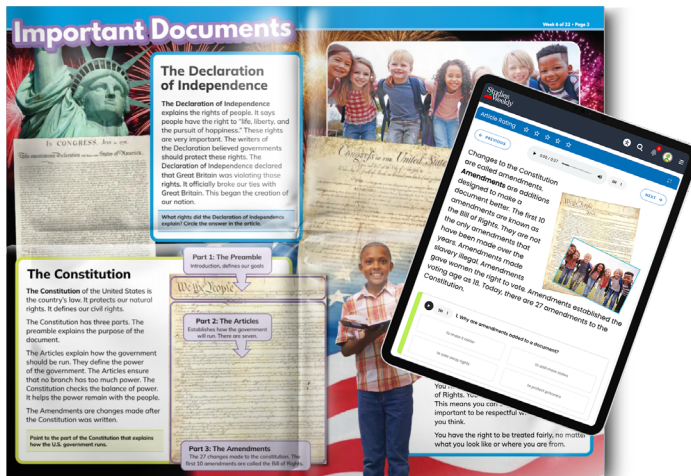
Meanwhile, in historical discourse, some language patterns include:

- “From one perspective, this event represented ...”

- “While ... was a contributing factor, a larger cause appears to be ...”
- “This can be understood within the context of ...”
- “Short-term consequences were ... and long-term consequences were ...”

These language patterns show historical discourse is aware of perspectives, complexity, and time.

Academic discourse, like any language, must be learned, and Zwiers argues that practicing these language patterns in classroom discussion is a great way to do so. Studies Weekly facilitates the teaching of academic discourse on many levels. First, by layering in knowledge. Articles early in a unit provide context that students can use to understand later articles. Then they can work out connections between context and event during classroom or small-group conversation.



Studies Weekly Article Analyzing Documents

Second, Studies Weekly includes many perspectives on large events so that students can talk about the many ways these events affected people.

Third, Studies Weekly teaches students the vocabulary for talking about history, supplementing it with terms from economics, geography, and geology. The more words students can use, the more productive their conversations become.



Example lesson walkthrough slide deck

Finally, Studies Weekly provides a Teacher Edition for each week of student content. This gives teachers dozens of pages of background knowledge, vocabulary words, lesson plans, activities, strategies for engaging multiple learning styles, reteaching materials, slide decks, videos, and assessments.

When students get to the end of the unit, Studies Weekly’s goal is that they be able to engage in academic discourse about what they have learned about. That they can make connections between events that they had not seen before. That they can learn to benefit from the knowledge and perspectives of other students in their class. And, that they can use academic discourse skills in life, where they will often need to build knowledge in conversation with other people.

¹Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Address to Congress – Concluding Remarks, 1862" <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>.

²Jeff Zwiers, "Classroom Talk," <https://www.jeffzwiers.org/classroom-talk>.

³Jeff Zwiers, "Idea-building Approach," <https://www.jeffzwiers.org/idea-building-approach>.

⁴Jeff Zwiers, "Argumentation Activities and Tools," <https://jeffzwiers.org/tools>.

⁵Jeff Zwiers, "Idea Building Blueprint," <https://jeffzwiers.org/tools>.