This guide provides an academic literacies approach to supporting teaching and learning. As we are now more pressurised than ever to deliver content while facing serious time constraints, the natural inclination will be to ask ‘What can we do without?’ It can be tempting to forego some of the “softer” skills in favour of more time on content. However, it is important that reading and writing within the discipline should not be seen as soft skills. Rather, within a resource constrained environment, reading and writing become even more critically relevant to effective teaching and learning.

An Academic Literacies approach acknowledges that although, for example, English is the official language of instruction, in fact each discipline really has its own particular ‘language’ or discourse. This discourse is evident not only in the vocabulary of the discipline, but also in the form, structure, nature and value placed on the different literacy practices present within the discipline. Therefore, within each discipline there are particular types of texts that students will need to read and write. For the student to engage meaningfully when they read, and to communicate meaningfully when they write, they will need to learn the conventions, values and practices of how knowledge is constructed, organised and communicated within a given discipline.

Given enough time and exposure, students can acquire these practices without necessarily requiring explicit teaching. However, with this approach, multiple opportunities must be provided for formative assessment that allows students to try and fail, receive feedback, and try again on their learning journey. Unfortunately, there are many challenges facing educators and students now that weren’t as pressing in the past. Firstly, many more of our students are now English additional language speakers. This means that we need to be aware that not only are our students trying to acquire disciplinary discourse, but many are doing this in an additional language. Secondly, our students don’t have the luxury of time or as many opportunities for practice. The pressure is on and the stakes are high. So, what can we, as educators, do to help our students engage meaningfully with content?

**Reading**

First and foremost, make your teaching explicit – specifically with regards to literacy practices. As all courses require students to read, this is a good place to start. Begin by carefully examining the texts that your students will need to read and ask yourself:

- Are these texts all the same? Or, will my students have to read across different genres? For example, text books, journal papers, case histories?
- Within each type of text, how is the information organised?
- Where is the most important information located?
- What kind of language is being used here?
- Where are students most likely to get stuck?

Once you know the answers to these questions, pass this information onto your students. The goal here is to give your students the “keys” to this new language they are grappling with. Once they have the keys, it becomes easier for them to engage with the content being communicated.
Writing
The next opportunity to take is to embed writing within the discipline. Firstly, writing offers students the opportunity to think through their work and as such provides an excellent learning opportunity. Think carefully about the types of written assignments you give your students and ask yourself:

- What are the different written genres I want my students to produce? For example, a reflection, an argumentative essay, a laboratory report or a portfolio task?
- How should each of these texts be structured?
- What are the most important features of each of these texts?
- Where are students most likely to struggle?

Just as with reading, make the valued written practices of the discipline clear to your students. Remember, not all writing needs to be marked - formative assessments offer excellent learning opportunities and can be used for peer review and feedback, which can also facilitate critical classroom discussions. However, even though you may not be grading the writing, it is still an important resource for you, the educator, as it offers insight into student thinking. As such, written work can help you to identify a struggling student early on.

Assessment
Finally, as almost all assessment at tertiary level requires reading and/or writing, it is our responsibility to make sure that when we assess, it is actually the students’ content knowledge and not their ability to interpret the cryptic phrasing of an assignment or exam question that is under scrutiny. Therefore, examine your questions carefully and ask yourself:

- What kinds of action words have I used and how do I expect students to respond to them? For example, describe, discuss, explain or argue?
- What kind of vocabulary have I used? Could my word choices pose a greater challenge to students that are not English first language?
- What kind of examples or scenarios have I used? Could my examples seem confusing to students that come from a different background or context than you do?

Please feel free to browse through are freely available online resources: (http://bit.ly/2h1G58j), or to contact the FHS Writing Lab directly (Natashia.muna@uct.ac.za) if you would like to know more about our services and how we can support both you and your students as you engage with the literacy practices of your discipline.

References