

# Standards in Action: Reflecting With Proficiency Level Descriptors

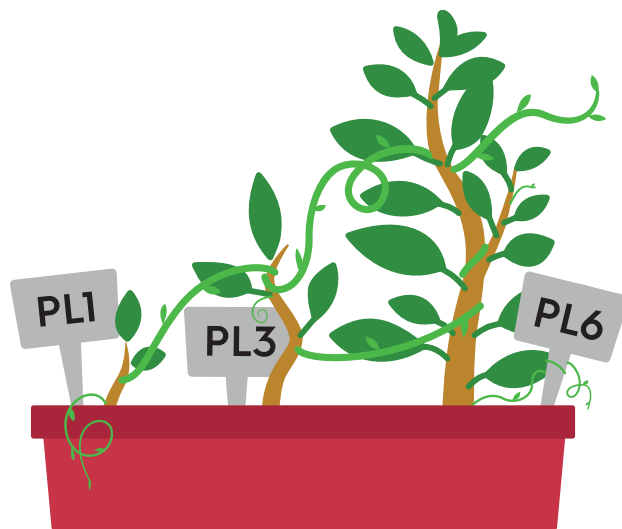
While the WIDA Language Expectations support educators to choose unit-level language goals expected for all students to reach, the Proficiency Level Descriptors (PLDs) describe how students might engage in those language goals across proficiency levels. A student at the beginning levels of language proficiency will use language differently than someone at intermediate and advanced levels; however, all students will be using language for the same purposes and to express the same content.

This handout gives examples from a variety of educator contexts on how they used the PLDs to inform their scaffolding practices to engage all students across different proficiency levels in content and language learning goals.

Educators can engage in this practice by taking the following steps:

1. Choose one PLD criterion as a focus by looking at the language goal for the unit and identifying the proficiency level of the expected language use.
2. Select one PLD criterion to identify how students' language progress may look or sound across proficiency levels as they engage in the language goal.
3. Reflect on the students who are learning together and their language backgrounds to consider how their languages can be leveraged to build their English proficiency.
4. Give opportunities for students to engage in content and language in multimodal ways, offering multiple pathways.

Continue reading to see how this process was used by a kindergarten, 5th-grade, 8th-grade, and high school teacher. You can also learn more by visiting the WIDA Snapshot [WIDA Proficiency Level Descriptors: Informing Expectations and Scaffolding](#).



## Kindergarten Science

Multilingual learner (ML) teacher Lanisia Scarbrough and her co-teaching partner, a kindergarten classroom teacher, are co-planning a lesson for the kindergartners to express their understanding of living and nonliving things through drawings and writing simple sentences. Lanisia refers to the kindergarten Proficiency Level Descriptors sentence criteria in the expressive mode to decide how to best scaffold language support for the students.

SENTENCE Grammatical complexity	Extend or enhance meanings through...					
	words, pictures, and phrases ( <i>cats and dogs</i> )	words, pictures, phrases and chunks of language ( <i>cats meow and dogs bark</i> )	sentence fragments ( <i>cats and dogs</i> )	sentence fragments and emerging use of simple sentences ( <i>Dogs sleep, Dogs bark.</i> )	simple sentences ( <i>Cats like to climb. Dogs like to run.</i> )	sentences with emerging use of clauses ( <i>My cat sleeps all day. My dog runs all the time. They are my pets.</i> )

### Choose one PLD criterion as a focus and identify the proficiency level of the expected language use.

- The Idaho state priority standard does not specify if students are required to create complete sentences. According to the district kindergarten writing rubric, students are required to write a complete sentence. Based on that, the goal is to get the students to write one sentence. The teachers notice a complete sentence reflects the end of level 5 in the kindergarten PLDs.

### Reflect on the students who are learning together and their language backgrounds.

- This class has both multilingual learners (MLs) and monolingual English-speaking students. The MLs are between PLD levels 2 and 5. Most of the MLs at the beginning level speak Swahili and have been in the country for a short period of time. They are grouped together to support meaning making across their languages.
- Students at developing and expanding proficiency levels speak Swahili, Persian, and Vietnamese.

### Identify how students may sound across proficiency levels.

- Students between PLD levels 1 and 3 can use pictures, words, or phrases, so they are first expected to draw a picture and then label it by copying from a word bank. They are provided with sentence frames.
- Some students between PLD levels 1 and 2 will be provided with opportunities to copy or trace model sentences as needed.

Students who are at PLD level 5 will be expected to write a complete sentence independently.

### Give opportunities for students to engage in content and language in multimodal ways.

- All students will begin by drawing and labeling parts of animals. Familiar animals that can be easily spelled (cat, dog, crab, etc.) are intentionally chosen to provide an opportunity for all students across English proficiency and literacy levels to spell the animals.
- They also have an opportunity to talk about animals using their labeled pictures before attempting to write about them.

## Grade 5 Language Arts

In a 5th-grade English language arts class, all students are expected to engage in a poetry unit where they are interpreting and expressing figurative language, such as metaphors, similes, and idioms. The English language specialist is collaborating with the language arts teacher to plan ways to scaffold the language of poetry in the unit by looking at the WIDA PLDs.

WORD, PHRASE Precision of language	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with...					
	some frequently used words and phrases with some precision ( <i>social studies, government</i> )	a small repertoire of words and phrases with developing precision ( <i>branches of government, executive power</i> )	a growing repertoire of words and phrases with growing precision ( <i>the founders, "two if by land..."</i> )	an expanding repertoire of words and phrases, including idioms and collocations with expanding precision ( <i>the lights are on but nobody's home...</i> )	a flexible repertoire of words and phrases, such as adverbials of time, manner, and place; verb types; and abstract nouns; with consistent precision ( <i>as a result of the war, forming a new nation</i> )	a variety of words and phrases, including evaluation, obligation, idioms, and collocations ( <i>necessary sacrifices, outdated law, fit for a king</i> )

### Choose one PLD criterion as a focus and identify the proficiency level of the expected language use.

- Since students are not required to create complete sentences for their poems, both teachers focus on the grades 4–5 PLDs for the expressive communication mode, looking specifically at the word/phrase dimension. They notice that figurative language is mentioned in proficiency level 4.

### Reflect on the students who are learning together and their language backgrounds.

- They identify three to five multilingual learners (MLs) in each class at the beginning levels of English language development.
- Most of the MLs speak Spanish, and a few are Chinese speakers.
- They consider poems that have been translated into these languages.
- They can group students by language for multilingual discussions.

### Identify how students may sound across proficiency levels.

- Multilingual students at the advanced and intermediate levels of English proficiency are ready to use a variety of expanded metaphors using increasingly complex English grammatical structures.
- Students at the beginning levels of English proficiency can build on their frequently used words and phrases and simple sentences by adding "like" and "as" to expand them into metaphors.

### Give opportunities for students to engage in content and language in multimodal ways.

- Students have the option to create a written poem with illustrations or a spoken poem with images in video form.
- They also have the option to create their poems in multiple languages.

## Grade 8 English Language Development

In an 8th-grade English Language Development (ELD) class, students are expected to write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. This is a self-contained ELD class with all multilingual learners in their third or fourth year of learning English. Multilingual learner educator Sarah Parrish uses the WIDA PLDs to reflect on students' proficiency levels and the learning task to identify the scaffolds necessary to support students successfully completing the task. Sarah chose to look at the PLDs for Discourse (Density of Language) for Grades 6-8, focusing on embedded clauses (mentioned in level 4).

DISCOURSE Density of language	Elaborate or condense ideas through...					
	some types of elaboration (adding a newly learned adjective to a noun)	a growing number of types of elaboration (adding articles or demonstratives to a noun: the or these clouds)	a variety of types of elaboration (adding classifiers: cumulus and cumulonimbus clouds)	a wide variety of types of elaboration (adding in embedded clauses after the noun: those storm clouds that we saw yesterday)	a flexible range of types of elaboration and some ways to condense ideas (scary looking storm clouds that turned dark in a matter of minutes and condensing through nominalization: that storm system)	multiple types of elaboration and a growing number of ways to condense ideas throughout a text

### Choose one PLD criterion as a focus and identify the proficiency level of the expected language use.

- Students will write a claim with reasons and evidence to support that claim. Sarah's goal is for students to give more details about their claims and evidence.
- This task is aimed at level 4 of Density of Language since it addresses embedded clauses. For example: "Japanese American families, who were sent to internment camps, faced discrimination."

### Reflect on the students who are learning together and their language background.

- This 8th-grade self-contained ELD class includes students with WIDA ACCESS writing scores 1 through 3. The majority are Spanish-dominant, alongside one Portuguese and one Vietnamese speaker. Students bring a wide range of native language literacy, which serves as a valuable foundation for developing their English language.
- The students struggle to expand their sentences with added details.

### Identify how students may sound across proficiency levels.

- While the goal is for students to work toward embedded clauses, not all students will be expected to use them.
- Students in earlier stages of language development will express their thinking through visual arguments using labeled images and phrases expanded with adjectives, building toward more detailed language use. These students will be creating simple sentences and adding details through adjectives.
- Students at PLD level 3 are expected to practice using both adjectives and dependent clauses with the teacher's support.

### Give opportunities for students to engage in content and language in multimodal ways.

- Students will choose a claim related to an internment, interpret it by matching it with images, and discuss their meaning with a partner. The class will co-construct a model response to guide their writing.
- They will then practice building sentences with embedded clauses using familiar topics (e.g., food, teachers) supported by visuals and sentence starters as needed. Before writing, all students will share their ideas orally with a partner.

## High School Mathematics

In her 9–12th-grade newcomers’ class, Maria White plans an activity where the goal is to articulate the process of solving mathematical equations using both oral and written English. Maria draws on her knowledge of the Proficiency Level Descriptors and her students’ linguistic and academic skills to think through how she can scaffold her language instruction throughout the activity.

WORD, PHRASE Precision of language	Create precise meanings through everyday, cross-disciplinary, and technical language with...					
	a growing repertoire of words and phrases with growing precision ( <i>mitosis, symbiotic relationships</i> )	an expanding repertoire of words and phrases such as idioms and collocations with expanding precision ( <i>miss the boat</i> )	a flexible repertoire of words and phrases such as adverbials of time, manner, and place; verb types; and abstract nouns with consistent precision ( <i>by exploring cultures, later that day</i> )	a variety of words and phrases, including evaluation and obligation, with precision ( <i>we shall overcome</i> )	a wide variety of words and phrases with precision ( <i>the dictator ruled with terror</i> ) according to the genre, purpose, and discipline	flexible and strategic use of various words and phrases ( <i>marveled at the Eiffel Tower</i> ) according to the genre, purpose, and discipline
DISCOURSE Cohesion of language	Connect ideas across a whole text through...					
	a growing number of cohesive devices (demonstratives, repetition)	an expanding number of cohesive devices (given/new, whole/part, class/subclass)	a flexible number of cohesive devices (ellipsis, substitution/omission)	a variety of cohesive devices used in genre- and discipline-specific ways	a wide variety of cohesive devices used in genre- and discipline-specific ways	a flexible and strategic use of cohesive devices

**Choose one PLD criterion as a focus and identify the proficiency level of the expected language use.**

- The task is to embed the language for math in an explanation of an equation while also using sequence connectors. Maria chose to focus on two PLD criterion—Discourse Cohesion of Language and Word/Phrase Precision of Language. The task is targeting the end of PLD level 2.

**Reflect on the students who are learning together and their language backgrounds.**

- These students are all newcomers who have arrived in the United States in the last year. Each class represents a variety of grade levels spanning grades 9–12. Most of the multilingual learners are Spanish speaking, but there are also students who speak Arabic, Kinyarwanda, Dari, Rohingya, and Swahili. While some of the students are comfortable solving basic algebraic equations, many are not.

**Identify how students may sound across proficiency levels.**

- Since this is a newcomers’ class, most students are at PLD level 1 with some approaching PLD level 2. Previous lessons provided students with opportunities to learn mathematical vocabulary words. Those who are at the earliest proficiency levels still struggle to remember the words and their pronunciation. Those who are approaching PLD level 2 are working on differentiating between the noun and verb forms of vocabulary words, such as “subtract” vs “minus.” All students are expected to use sequence connectors.

**Give opportunities for students to engage in content and language in multimodal ways.**

- Students are grouped by language to encourage the use of their first language, and students with stronger math skills are paired with those who find math challenging. They also utilize anchor charts and mentor texts to support their explanations. The mentor texts model how to explain algebraic expressions using sequence words and math-specific vocabulary.
- Students work in groups to explain the process in English before volunteers present their explanation at the front of class.