

How are speech-language pathologists specially trained to address literacy needs?

Literacy can be defined as the understanding of the printed representation of spoken language for functional use in daily life contexts, at an age-appropriate level.

“Writing is talk written down.
If you can say it, you can write it.
If you can write it, you can read it.
And if you can say it, read it, and write it, you can understand it.”

Even slight deficits in any component of the speaking-reading-writing triad can change this into a complicated process.

Spoken and written language are reciprocally connected. A solid foundation in spoken language (speech sounds, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension) is crucial for the development of reading and writing. For example, a child with an articulation disorder who substitutes “t” for “c” would likely use the letters “T-A-T” to spell “cat.” Furthermore, a child with a language disorder might produce utterances such as “Me has ball,” in his speech, and write similar sentences at best.

Likewise, children who have trouble recognizing familiar words, decoding unfamiliar words, reading fluently, and understanding written texts may also find oral language tasks difficult, such as describing objects, people, or processes, or giving verbal instructions. The gap between students who perform adequately on classroom language tasks and those who do not widens markedly following the shift from “learning to read” in the early years to “reading to learn” at around grade 3.

Conversely, improvements in oral language skills can result in better writing and more fluent reading, and vice versa—individuals who read well and often, and who are able to improve their written expression via systematic training and practice can become more articulate speakers, who use more complex sentences and possess a richer vocabulary.

Since the acquisition and development of spoken and written language are so closely connected, SLPs have a *responsibility* in addressing literacy. Spoken and written language difficulties can involve any of the *components of language* (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) and can occur during *speaking or listening* tasks, and at different *levels* of speech and language production (sound, syllable, word, sentence, and discourse).

The SLP’s knowledge of normal and disordered language acquisition, as well as her experience in developing individually-tailored programs, prepares her to assume roles in reading and writing intervention, which could include identification of children “at-risk” for problems, direct intervention to target speech and oral language skills and/or emergent literacy, assessments, and providing assistance to teachers and parents.

