

Request for proposals: Secondary literacy evidence review

Background

Why literacy matters

Literacy is essential for pupils to access the secondary school curriculum and engage effectively with learning. Literacy is therefore a high priority for policy and for the sector, as literacy levels have an impact on attainment across the whole curriculum – not just in English.

We define literacy as including reading, writing, and oral language development.

EEF guidance reports

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) publishes a range of **guidance reports** for the education sector, each grounded in the best available evidence and designed to provide actionable recommendations that promote pupil progress and drive school improvement.

The EEF is committed to regularly updating these reports to reflect a continually evolving evidence base.

The EEF's existing secondary literacy guidance report **Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools** (EEF, 2018) is underpinned by three evidence reviews:

- **Literacy Development** (Breadmore et al., 2019)
- **Writing Approaches in Years 3 to 13** (Slavin et al., 2019)
- **Reading Programmes for Secondary Students** (Baye et al., 2019)

This evidence review is designed to:

- update these previous reviews and
- test the recommendations in the current guidance report.

This will allow the EEF to publish updated guidance.

The literacy disadvantage gap

Literacy is key to the EEF's mission of breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. Schools often use their pupil premium spend on literacy provision or interventions (Bowen et al., 2025).

Literacy levels at the start of secondary school, as indicated by the results of key stage 2 tests, are lower for pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds than for their peers (DfE, 2026a).

In 2024/25, 63% of disadvantaged pupils reached the expected standard in reading (compared to 81% of pupils not known to be disadvantaged).

59% of disadvantaged pupils reached the expected standard for writing at the end of key stage 2, compared to 78% of pupils not known to be disadvantaged.

This disadvantage gap remains at the end of key stage 4 with, with 52% of disadvantaged pupils attaining a grade 4 or above for English language GCSE in 2024/25, compared to 77% of pupils not known to be disadvantaged) (DfE, 2026b).

Additionally, some evidence suggests that teachers see pupils' socioeconomic background as a potential barrier to literacy attainment (National Literacy Trust, 2015).

The changing policy context

Since the publication of the existing EEF guidance report in 2018:

- The **Curriculum and Assessment Review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all** (DfE, 2025) noted that literacy levels have declined since 2018 (as measured by the OECD). It recommended the creation of an oracy framework to complement the existing **reading** and **writing** frameworks.
 - The Department for Education's (DfE) response to this has been to confirm that there will be a new **combined secondary oracy, reading and writing framework**.
- The DfE has launched a short course for teachers and leaders called '**Supporting all readers in secondary school**' and a more extensive **funded professional development offer for supporting students with reading needs**.
- The DfE English Hubs programme, which to date has chiefly concentrated on supporting reading provision in primary schools, is being expanded to secondary schools following a successful pilot in 2025.
- A new **year 8 reading test** has also been announced, following a recommendation in the Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025). It is expected that the DfE will provide subsidised resources through the English Hubs' expanded remit. These measures aim to support schools to ensure that when pupils start secondary school, any struggling readers are effectively identified through screening and diagnostic testing and then offered appropriately targeted academic support.
- The DfE launched a literacy leadership national professional qualification (**the NPQLL**). This qualification emphasises that implementation should involve senior and middle leaders across the curriculum as well as whole-school teaching and learning, SEND provision, and reading, writing, and oracy leads.

Literacy at secondary school

There is a significant rise in the literacy demands of the secondary school curriculum compared to primary school (van der Kleij, 2023).

A central focus for secondary schools is therefore effectively identifying and supporting struggling readers and/or writers. In particular, schools are looking to identify learners whose

literacy skills do not allow them to access the secondary curriculum. When identified, schools are offering these pupils targeted interventions and monitoring ongoing progress to ensure that support is provided for as long as is needed.

At secondary school, literacy is a whole-school issue, rather than a distinct subject as it is in primary school. While English teachers and the English department often take a leading role in a school's literacy offer, literacy needs to be part of every subject and every secondary school teacher's pedagogy: the secondary curriculum requires literacy skills to be integrated into the teaching of each subject (DfE, 2014). This approach can be described as disciplinary literacy.

However, some secondary school teachers may feel they do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, time, confidence or motivation to include a focus on literacy successfully in their subject lessons.

Research questions

Here are some initial research questions which we encourage teams to use as a starting point when developing their own.

We would not necessarily expect the proposal to cover all these research questions, but we do expect teams to outline how each aspect of their review will answer their chosen questions.

Teams may want to include ideas for additional questions in their proposals.

Context
What challenges and barriers do pupils and schools face in developing literacy skills at secondary school?
How do these challenges and barriers vary across demographic groups of pupils, including for those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds?
Identifying need
How can schools effectively identify struggling readers and/or writers?
Interventions and approaches
Which literacy approaches are most effective in improving literacy outcomes and wider attainment outcomes in Key Stages 3 and 4, including for socioeconomically disadvantaged pupils and struggling readers and/or writers?
What are the key features of effective literacy approaches?
Are there approaches which are particularly effective for disadvantaged pupils or for struggling readers and/or writers? If so, what are the key features of these approaches?
What is the evidence on the effectiveness of professional development in literacy for secondary school teachers?

Review teams should articulate the scope of their review in their proposals, along with a credible plan to answer the research questions.

We are aware that the research questions require a combination of research methods, as detailed in ‘methodological considerations’ below.

As this review would underpin an update to **the existing guidance report**, teams might consider testing the appropriateness of existing recommendations within the scope of their research plan.

Scope of research

The purpose of this review is to allow the EEF to update guidance on supporting literacy at secondary school.

We want to update and expand our understanding of:

- how socio-economic disadvantage interacts with literacy development, and
- which literacy approaches and interventions have evidence of raising attainment (both in terms of literacy outcomes and cognitive outcomes from other subjects).

We expect the review to use a broad definition of literacy and to include reading, writing, and oral language.

We are interested in universal approaches to literacy as well as targeted approaches for struggling readers and writers. Due to the increased policy and sector focus on identifying literacy needs and supporting pupils’ reading at the start of secondary school, we are also interested in evidence on the ways in which schools can effectively identify and support literacy needs.

Given the EEF’s mission, we are particularly interested in how the review’s findings relate to socio-economically disadvantaged pupils. We would expect research teams to report on impact for disadvantaged pupils throughout the review. This would include where this might be a research gap and answering the broader research questions relating to this group of pupils.

The scope would include literacy interventions and approaches across secondary education (ages 11-16). Given the jump between the literacy expectations of pupils at primary school and at secondary school, any studies that include a focus on this difference in demands would be of interest. The successful team will need to develop inclusion criteria to reflect this, in consultation with the EEF.

We are interested in global evidence in principle, but our focus is on answering our research questions in relation to pupils in schools in England. To make the review manageable in the timeframe, the inclusion criteria could be narrowed to reflect this focus.

We would expect a successful team to engage with **the existing guidance** and to plan for how this new review can iterate and improve the guidance. This may involve adding detail to recommendations, identifying areas where the evidence no longer supports practice, or filling gaps where additional recommendations could better meet the needs of practice.

Methodological considerations

We expect the review to include a range of research types. Given the range of research questions proposed, teams may wish to use a mixed methods approach, or to consider methods that go beyond the scope of a traditional systematic review of intervention studies.

We would expect that this is limited to desk research, rather than involving primary data collection. Where impact is being assessed, we would expect synthesis of experimental and quasi-experimental primary research evaluating literacy approaches and including literacy outcomes and wider cognitive outcomes.

When developing their approach, teams should consider the limitations, caveats and complexities they may encounter. For example, teams should consider how to maximise transferability to the English context, and how they might address issues around ecological validity and comparability between systems.

Additionally, it is an expectation that the studies identified in this review will be coded in EPPI Reviewer and in line with the EEF's existing data extraction tools (in addition to the coding tool devised by the review team that is specific to this review). This includes the **main data extraction tool** and the **effect size data extraction tool**. This will allow the studies to be integrated into our existing data infrastructure, and the data used to support future outputs by the EEF. Proposals should estimate costs to include the cost of using EPPI Reviewer.

Replicability/transparency

We expect that any review team will commit to best practice in conducting reviews, including by:

- publishing a protocol/study plan that pre-specifies inclusion criteria and search strategy prior to searching the evidence base, to avoid introducing bias through the selection of included studies
- considering study quality through a risk of bias assessment
- considering approaches to de-duplicate evidence synthesis by using data sharing, open access or other collaborative methods.

The review team will need to develop inclusion criteria (in collaboration with the EEF) that make the review manageable in the timeframe.

We are open to teams utilising technology as part of the review process (e.g. machine-assisted searching or screening) as long as the process is tested, transparently captured, and academically rigorous.

Budgets for similar research projects

Budgets for EEF funded evidence synthesis projects have varied depending on the proposed methodology, research questions, and number of relevant studies.

In their proposals, teams should provide costs that provide clear breakdowns for how costs will change depending on the number of studies identified at different stages of the review.

Our typical costs for systematic reviews range from £80,000 to £200,000. Since we expect this to be a comprehensive review, we would anticipate costs towards the top end of this range.

We will assess proposals for cost effectiveness with an understanding of the scale of the task.

We would expect proposals to include a risk assessment and mitigations for potential barriers to delivery (e.g. loss of key research team members).

Who should apply?

Research teams with experience of conducting evidence synthesis in education.

We are interested in proposals from single research teams and consortia with complementary expertise, where the consortium can demonstrate that they will work well together to ensure the quality and efficiency of the project.

This call for proposals is open. Researchers do not need to be part of EEF's panel of evaluators.

We accept applications from legally constituted organisations and not from individuals. The organisation does not have to be based in England. If you are based outside of England, you will need to demonstrate how you will ensure that research outputs are relevant to the English education system.

What does a successful proposal look like?

Teams should submit a research proposal, which will:

- Indicate which research questions are being answered by the design.
- Involve a **strong team** with prior experience of similar research, including the proposed methods, excellent review expertise, as well as prior research and/or practical expertise related to the approaches being investigated.
 - Please include full CVs of proposed team members, highlighting relevant expertise.
- Provide a **detailed description** of the research project. This should include:
 - A detailed description of the methodology, search strategy and approach to synthesising and communicating results, as well as consideration of potential inclusion criteria that would allow the research questions to be answered within the proposed timelines.
 - Any available background scoping work that supports your assessment of the identified strategy.
- Provide a clear project management plan for completing the research in achievable timelines, including:

- o An assessment of risks to the completion of the research and how they will be mitigated.
 - o Confirmation that members of the proposed team have the capacity and availability to complete the research.
 - o A timeline which includes key touchpoints at which the team will brief EEF on emerging themes/findings, as well as a presentation of findings before a final written output.
- Represent **good value for money**. All applications must attach a budget with reasonable disaggregation across cost categories. We acknowledge accurately costing review work is challenging when there is uncertainty over the extent of the evidence base. Breakdowns should indicate how costs might change depending on the number of studies found during searching and screening. There should be a justification for study number estimates or a clear process and scoping period that occurs within timelines.
- Be around **4,000 words** long, excluding references (This is an indicative length. The focus should be on quality rather than quantity).

What criteria will be used to award funding?

The research proposals will be scored by the EEF's evidence synthesis team under the following criteria each with their respective weighting and using the scoring scale indicated in Table 1.

Capability and relevant experience of core project team (35%)

- The proposed team demonstrates experience conducting evidence synthesis research in education.
- The proposed team have experience in mixed methods and innovative approaches to research in education.
- The proposed team demonstrates understanding of the evidence/existing research, context and expertise that are relevant for the areas for the review.

Methodology and approach (50%)

- The proposed review methodology is well defined, including clearly describing the population, intervention, comparison, and outcome.
- The proposed research design will provide high-quality evidence to answer the identified research questions.
- Key risks to project delivery are identified and appropriate strategies to mitigate these risks are proposed.

Value for money (15%)

- Detailed cost of your proposal and how this demonstrates value for money.

Scoring Criteria	
0	Totally fails to meet the requirement - information not available
1	Meets some of the requirements with limited supporting information
2	Meets some of the requirements with reasonable explanation
3	Fully meets the requirements with detailed explanation and evidence
4	Exceeds the requirements with extensive explanation and evidence

Timeline

An indicative timeline should be included in proposals, with built in periods for review by EEF (for example at protocol development and/or after study screening).

Assuming a late November start, we would expect the final report by Spring 2028.

How to apply

Interested applicants should submit their research proposals by email to **Michelle.Grace@eefoundation.org.uk** by 5pm on 9th October 2026.

We anticipate responding to applicants by 23rd October 2026. To allow time for board approval, we expect work on the project to officially start in late November.

If you have any questions, please email **Michelle.Grace@eefoundation.org.uk**.

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