

Nature-Based Learning Ideas Guide



What can I do outside today?



LITERACY

Preschool - Grade 2



What Can I Do Outside Today?

Introduction

From our earliest years, language shapes how we understand the world, connect with others, and express who we are. What children learn about literacy before kindergarten — through stories, conversation, songs, and play — connects directly to what they will do in elementary school and beyond. This guide is designed to help educators explore how nature-based and outdoor learning can support literacy standards in preschool through second grade. It builds on the Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Ideas Guide and aligns with the [Early Childhood Indicators of Progress \(ECIPs\)](#) and the 2020 Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts (ELA). While the focus is on literacy — including reading, writing, and exchanging ideas — many of the activities can connect to other areas of learning.

Through play, children use imagination, exploration, and inquiry to build cognitive and social-emotional skills, as well as the confidence to try new experiences.

Outdoor play also gives children important physical activity and opportunities to practice both large and small motor skills that support early writing and communication. As much as possible, outdoor learning should be a regular part of the classroom routine. However, adding any amount of outdoor instruction to your day has benefits.

As children play together outdoors, they naturally engage in the building blocks of literacy — telling stories, asking questions, describing what they observe, and making meaning from the world around them. Educators play a key role in guiding this learning by creating open-ended experiences that inspire rich conversation, vocabulary development, storytelling, and a love of language. Through nature-based literacy experiences, children develop deeper connections with one another and build a lasting appreciation for both the natural world and the power of words.

The connections to the ECIPS and the Minnesota ELA Standards listed in this guide are starting points — educators are encouraged to find more connections both within ELA and across other content areas.

Lifelong learning begins with play, and outdoor play is a powerful, research-backed way to support children's development in all learning environments, including kindergarten and beyond.

Find More Outdoor and Nature Learning Resources:

- [Minnesota Department of Education, Early Education Outdoor Learning](#)
- [Department of Children, Youth, and Families, Early Childhood Outdoor Learning](#)

Happy exploring!

What Can I Do Outside Today?

“The impact of taking the learning outdoors for our students has been nothing short of amazing. Our teachers report drastically improved behaviors, full engagement, improved peer relationships, and an increased level of independence. It does not appear that the students realize they are learning things while they are outside because they are having so much fun with the processes and materials. They also have more space, less sensory inputs on their internal systems, and a sense of autonomy. The children who often run out of the classroom for various reasons are the most obvious benefactors of this time spent outside.

~ Northland Community School

Outdoor education

Education that occurs mostly in the outdoors and is focused on engagement with the outdoor environment

Bundling Within and Across Disciplines

Bundling is the idea of drawing from multiple academic standards and benchmarks when designing student learning experiences. When benchmarks are bundled, students can build related skills simultaneously while **engaging in authentic, developmentally appropriate learning activities such as those in this guide.**

Bundling can happen **within a single subject**, such as combining reading and writing benchmarks within the Minnesota ELA Standards. Bundling within a subject helps students experience the connected, reciprocal nature of learning. For example, the literacy skills described in the three ELA strands – 1) reading, 2) writing, and 3) listening, speaking, viewing, and exchanging ideas – all support each other. Bundling multiple ELA benchmarks together strengthens students’ literacy development.

Bundling can also happen **across subjects**, such as pairing an ELA benchmark with one from the Minnesota Science Standards. The final activity in this guide – *Ask a question about an outdoor location or object and explore the place or object in order to answer your question* – pairs well with a similar activity in the Science Ideas Guide – *Go for a walk to listen and observe what is heard and seen*. Bundling the benchmarks from these activities in a single learning experience lets students engage in literacy and science at the same time.

We encourage you to explore bundling within and across subject areas, using this guide as a starting point.

Nature-based education

Nature as the central organizing feature of the curriculum and a focus is made on children forming a connection with the natural world and how the natural world supports children’s development. It can be conducted indoors or outdoors

A note on ELA benchmarks:

Throughout this guide, Minnesota ELA grade-level benchmarks are identified by code (e.g., 0.1.1.0 or 1.1.42) along with a summary of what that benchmark covers from kindergarten through grade 2. When developing full units and lesson plans, refer to the full benchmark language in the [2020 Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts](#).



Select nature-themed books to read aloud outside. Take turns sharing about the text.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC4: Engagement**
 - Child participates and has sustained attention for interactions that involve print.
- **LLC7: Concepts of Print**
 - Child understands the fundamentals of print, such as orientation, organization, and features of print in the child's home language and/or English.
- **LLC8: Comprehension of Text**
 - Child understands the events and order of events in a story or text in one or more languages.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Reading**
 - 0.1.1.0, 1.1.1.0: Demonstrate understanding of the basic features of print.
 - 0.1.2.1, 1.1.2.1, 2.1.2.1: Read and monitor understanding of grade-level text.
 - 1.1.2.2, 2.1.2.2, 0.1.2.3, 1.1.2.3, 2.1.2.3: Choose, read, and comprehend texts that address academic tasks and personal interest.
 - 0.1.4.1, 1.1.4.1, 2.1.4.1: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text; recount the text.
 - 0.1.4.2, 1.1.4.2, 2.1.4.2: Identify the topic, central idea, message, or moral of a text.
- **Strand: Listening, Speaking, Viewing, and Exchanging Ideas**
 - 0.3.1.1, 1.3.1.1, 2.3.1.1: Exchange ideas through discussion, participating as speaker and listener.



Additional Ideas

- After the read-aloud, invite learners to retell the story or share a key detail using a nature item as a prop or visual prompt.
- Younger learners can act out a favorite moment from the story or share about the characters or main idea.
- Older learners might take turns asking and answering questions about the text with a partner.





Write with chalk on the pavement or sticks in the snow, or write outside on white boards or clipboards.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC9: Writing Conventions**
 - Child understands that words can be written, and that writing has meaning.
- **P6: Dexterity**
 - Child coordinates and controls movement of hands and fingers to grasp (hold with fist), hold (pinch finger and thumb), and manipulate objects.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.1.0, 1.2.1.0: Print uppercase and lowercase letters.
 - 1.2.1.2, 2.2.1.2: Accurately spell select words.
 - 0.2.2.1, 1.2.2.1, 2.2.2.1: Write routinely through a combination of writing, drawing, and speaking.
 - 1.2.1.3, 2.2.1.3: Use parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions) in simple sentences authentically.

Additional Ideas

- Younger learners might use chalk to trace large letters on the pavement.
- For older learners, consider collaborative sentence-building, where each student writes one word in a shared sentence chain, or ask students to write a response to a nature-based prompt on individual clipboards.
- Learners can share their writing with a partner and talk about what they wrote.





Play sound games outside, such as letter-sound hopscotch, outdoor sound BINGO, “I Spy” with descriptive words or beginning sounds/letters/rhymes, or “what do you hear?”.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC5: Phonological Awareness**
 - Child hears (as able) and understands the separate sounds that make up language.
- **LLC6: Letter Recognition**
 - Child recognizes the shapes of letters and recalls the names of letters.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Reading**
 - 0.1.1.1, 1.1.1.1, 2.1.1.1: Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).
- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.1.2: Demonstrate one-to-one letter-sound correspondence.

Additional Ideas

- For younger learners, play I Spy with beginning sounds only (“I spy something that starts with a /b/.”) Use clapping or jumping to segment syllables in nature words learners encounter.
- For older learners, extend to blends and digraphs, or have students come up with their own clues for partners using target sounds from current phonics instruction.





Act a story out as a class outdoors. Use nature items as props or scenery.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC3: Vocabulary and Syntax**
 - The child understands vocabulary and culturally-specific ways for putting words together in their home language and/or English.
- **LLC8: Comprehension of Text**
 - Child understands the events and order of events in a story or text in one or more languages.

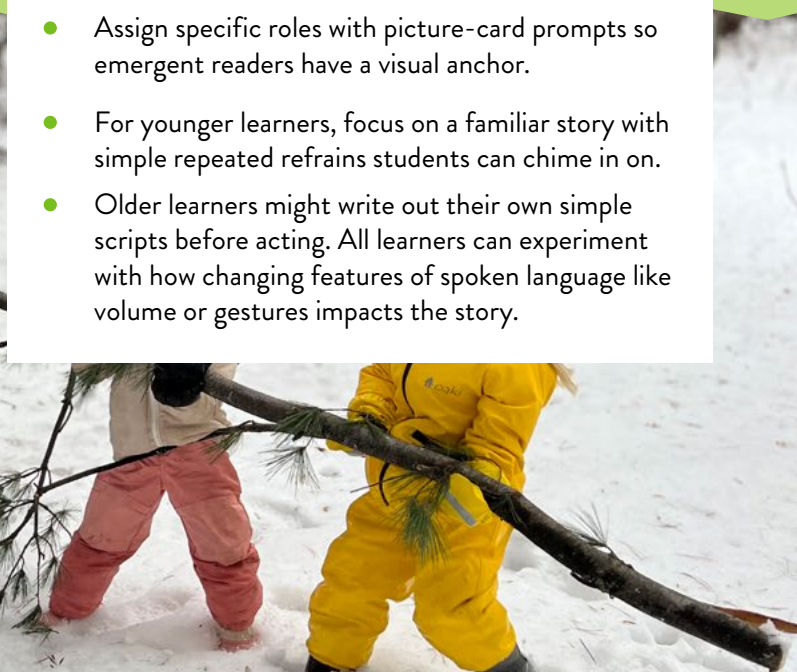
K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.6.1, 1.2.6.1, 2.2.6.1: Tell a story about a personal experience or that of a character; add details and introduce conflict.
 - 0.2.6.2, 1.2.6.2, 2.2.6.2: Order beginning, middle, and end of a story; include details in an order that makes sense; use words that signal changes in situation (next, surprisingly).
- **Strand: LSVEI**
 - 0.3.1.1, 1.3.1.1, 2.3.1.1 - Exchange ideas through storytelling; follow the sequence of a story.
 - 0.3.2.1, 1.3.2.1, 2.3.2.1: Speak audibly and express yourself clearly; use intonation and phrasing in spoken language; use features of spoken language including volume, rhythm, and gestures.



Additional Ideas

- Assign specific roles with picture-card prompts so emergent readers have a visual anchor.
- For younger learners, focus on a familiar story with simple repeated refrains students can chime in on.
- Older learners might write out their own simple scripts before acting. All learners can experiment with how changing features of spoken language like volume or gestures impacts the story.





Journal with paper and pencils or write a story with nature elements or animals as characters.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC2: Social Conversation**
 - Child communicates with others to express feelings, wants, and ideas to caregivers.
- **LLC9: Writing Conventions**
 - Child understands that words can be written, and that writing has meaning.
- **P6: Dexterity**
 - Child coordinates and controls movement of hands and fingers to grasp (hold with fist), hold (pinch finger and thumb), and manipulate objects.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.1.0, 1.2.1.0: Print uppercase and lowercase letters.
 - 1.2.1.2, 2.2.1.2: Accurately spell select words.
 - 1.2.1.3, 2.2.1.3: Use parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions) in simple sentences authentically.
 - 0.2.2.1, 1.2.2.1, 2.2.2.1: Write routinely through a combination of writing, drawing, and speaking.
 - 0.2.2.2, 1.2.2.2, 2.2.2.2: Write to share perspective, identity, and voice.
 - 0.2.4.1, 1.2.4.1, 2.2.4.1: Write to share a personal opinion.



Additional Ideas

- For younger learners, use a drawing-first approach, where children sketch the nature element or animal and label with teacher support.
- For older learners, consider providing a sentence stem ("The ___ was ___ because...") or a story map template.
- Offer clipboards or notebooks for easier writing outdoors.





Write a short poem, group poem, or oral poem about an animal or object found in nature. Share or perform the poems outside.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC2: Social Conversation**
 - Child communicates with others to express feelings, wants, and ideas to caregivers.
- **A4: Self-Expression**
 - Child uses art for innovation and self-expression within the context of their culture.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.3.1, 1.2.3.1, 2.2.3.1: Plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish writing.
 - 0.2.6.1, 1.2.6.1, 2.2.6.2: Write to create, including orally.
- **Strand: LSVEI**
 - 0.3.2.1, 1.3.2.1, 2.3.2.1: Speak audibly and express yourself clearly; use intonation and phrasing in spoken language; use features of spoken language including volume, rhythm, and gestures.

Additional Ideas

- For younger learners, consider a whole class “I notice/I wonder/It reminds me of” frame, with each child contributing one oral line.
- For older learners, use a simple repeated structure like a cinquain or acrostic poem built around a nature word.
- Give learners time to practice performing their poems to partners and the class.





Ask a question about an outdoor location or object and explore the place or object in order to answer your question.

ECIPS Alignment

- **LLC2: Social Conversation**
 - Child communicates with others to express feelings, wants, and ideas to caregivers.
- **AL2: Inquisitiveness**
 - Child explores the environment and seeks interaction with people and objects; willingly tries new things.

K-2 Standards Alignment

- **Strand: Writing**
 - 0.2.7.1, 1.2.7.1, 2.2.7.1: Ask and answer questions to participate in shared research and writing projects.
 - 1.2.7.2, 2.2.7.1: Plan and conduct research from a variety of sources and share findings orally and in writing.

Additional Ideas

- For younger learners, consider starting with a whole-class inquiry question, or have children find two things in nature to compare and contrast.
- Older learners might record their findings in a short “field notes” entry with a labeled diagram or a list of facts they discovered.

