Best Practice for Screen Use - a Guide for Secondary Teachers

Digital technology is now a routine part of teaching and learning in secondary classrooms. Used purposefully, screens can enhance learning by helping students access information, receive instruction, conduct research, organise learning, practise skills and create written and multimodal work. They can also support curriculum content, simulations, collaboration and increasingly independent study. However, students report growing screen use as they enter secondary school, and the boundaries between learning, leisure and social use become harder to manage.



Quality screen use depends on clear learning goals, strong pacing, explicit expectations, active monitoring and reliable access. Classroom observations showed that secondary lessons combined technology-rich phases with discussion, handwriting, practical work and teacher explanation. When disengagement occurred, it was often linked to waiting, unclear tasks, transitions, technical problems or easy access to unrelated content, rather than to device use alone.

Teachers therefore have an important role in helping students develop purposeful, safe and increasingly independent screen habits. Support should change across the secondary years as students take more responsibility for managing attention, research, production and study.



Design tasks that make students' thinking visible

Require students to explain their reasoning, show their working and discuss how they reached an answer, including when they use AI. Use checkpoints and feedback to assess understanding throughout the task.



Teach critical digital and AI literacy

Explicitly teach effective research, source evaluation, verification of AI-generated claims, and transparent acknowledgement of assistance. Continue checking foundational skills such as file management and platform navigation, since frequent device use does not guarantee competence.



Develop self-regulation within clear classroom boundaries

Combine agreed device routines and active supervision with opportunities for students to recognise distractions, manage their attention and reflect on their habits. Discuss study routines, device cut-off times and help-seeking, while gradually increasing responsibility according to students' readiness.



Teachers cannot do this alone. Reliable devices, technical support, consistent school expectations and communication with families all help students develop safe, purposeful and increasingly independent screen habits.

NSW GOVERNMENT

Best Practice in Screen Use for Education

PROUDLY FUNDED BY THE NSW GOVERNMENT

In this research project, we surveyed 1057 NSW students, 1686 parents, 166 school leaders and 914 present and 805 future teachers, in both government and non-government schools. We also held 133 focus groups with 426 participants across these stakeholder groups and observed 68 classrooms in NSW government schools. All data were collected in 2025. For our full report, and toolkit resources for parents, teachers, students and school leaders, visit **http://screensineducation.org**

TIPS FOR SECONDARY TEACHERS

Plan for curriculum outcomes
Start with the curriculum intention. Use screens where they improve access, modelling, research, practice, analysis, collaboration, creation, feedback or authentic disciplinary work. Avoid using a platform simply because it is available.

Use consistent attention routines
Be clear about when students may open their devices and what should be on screen. During instruction or discussion, use a consistent routine: students might turn their laptops towards you, switch off their screens, or lower their lids partway if closing them fully would mean waiting for the laptops to restart.

Structure independent work
Break longer digital tasks into stages with concrete deadlines, progress checks and feedback. Make the expected product, source requirements and success criteria explicit so students know what to do next.

Monitor actively
Position yourself to see students' activity. Circulate and ask students to explain their progress. Use live response or progress information where available, but keep teacher questioning and observation central.

Reduce waiting and technical disruption
Check links, files, platform access and device readiness before the lesson. Provide an alternative pathway or non-digital component so login problems, updates and troubleshooting do not create avoidable downtime.

Teach self-regulation directly
Discuss distraction rather than relying only on restrictions. Teach students to check their task, tab, time and next step, and to recognise when messaging, entertainment or unrelated browsing is displacing learning.

Teach research and AI literacy
Model credible searching, source evaluation, paraphrasing, referencing, and academic integrity. Where AI tools are relevant, make permitted uses, limitations, and expectations explicit and aligned with school policy.

Balance digital and non-digital learning
Combine screens with discussion, note-making, handwriting, practical work and face-to-face collaboration. Finish digital work with explanation, application or reflection so students process rather than simply access information.

Communicate with parents
When communicating with parents, explain how and why your students are using screens.For example, at parent information nights you might explain the digital skills students are learning to help them safely research and develop their literacy. Use communication with parents to help establish shared expectations surrounding technology use.

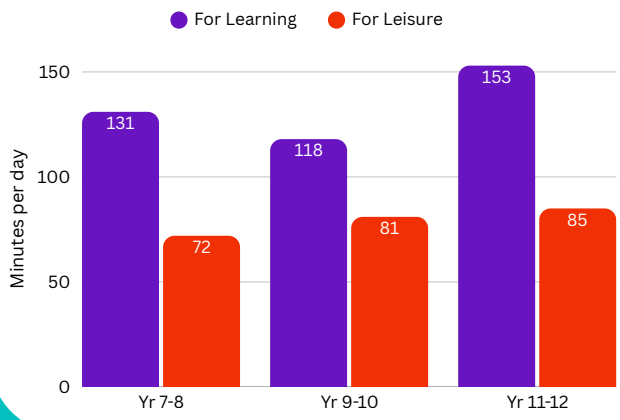
Other resources

- Screen Use Research & Resource Hub (NSW Department of Education)
- Professional learning for educators (eSafety Commissioner)
- Best practice toolkit (Screens in Education)

Best Practice in Screen Use for Education

Screen Use at NSW Secondary School Snapshot from 2025

Student reported time spent on screen at school



Common learning apps

Google Classroom · YouTube · Google · Canva · Google Slides · Google Docs · PowerPoint · Microsoft Teams

48%

of observed class time involved no student technology use.

88%

on-task rate in the secondary classes observed.

84%

of secondary students reported being distracted when using screens in class.

40%

of observed lessons had teacher imposing time constraints to support focus.

90%

of observed lessons had teachers circulating to manage student tech use.

28%

of observed lessons included closing laptop lids, placing iPads face down or turning screens off to listen.

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Based on the NSW statewide screen use survey findings with 1057 NSW K-12 students in **2025**. The survey asked students to report their screen use in the last full school day at school, for learning and for fun, as well as their experience with using screens for learning in general. Surveys were conducted in both NSW government & non-government schools. Researchers also observed 68 classes in NSW government schools. For our full report, and toolkit resources for parents, teachers, students and school leaders, visit **http://screensineducation.org**