



Reading, Writing, and the Common Core State Standards

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Introduction and summary

During the 2014-15 school year, more high school seniors read the young adult-oriented books *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Divergent* than Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, according to a report that tracks what K-12 students at more than 30,000 schools are reading during the school year.¹ These books are generally self-selected, making it not all that surprising that students would prefer to read a contemporary *New York Times* bestseller than a 17th-century play written in early modern English. And while some of the books that students select are thematically targeted to a mature audience, they are not particularly challenging to read for the average high schooler. *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Divergent*, for example, have the readability of a fourth- or fifth-grade text in terms of sentence structure and word difficulty.²

There is substantial evidence that much of what students are currently reading is not particularly challenging. This lack of complexity in students’ reading and writing is likely undermining their preparedness for college and the workplace. In addition, despite the predominant role that reading and writing serve in other subjects and disciplines, literacy development has long been relegated to the English or reading classroom.

Take the issue of reading complexity. Three of the top five most commonly assigned titles in grades 9 through 12 are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Crucible*, and *Of Mice and Men*.³ All three books, while classics, are not particularly challenging in terms of sentence structure and complexity. Does that mean that Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, which broaches issues of racial inequality should instead be introduced to elementary school-aged children? Most people—including English teachers—probably would not agree. Readability is only one factor when considering the intended audience of a work of literature.

But the difficulty of the reading material to which students are exposed is not inconsequential. An ACT report finds that “performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not.” This holds true across gender, race and ethnicity, and family income levels.⁴

Yet there is a stark gap between the complexity of texts that high school students are reading and of those that they will confront in college and in their careers. Students reading at the average level of high school texts, for example, may be comfortable with as little as 5 percent of university-level texts and with only one-quarter of the texts that they would encounter in the military or the workplace.⁵

One only need skim the data to see that just a small proportion of students are on the path to graduate from high school ready for college and a career. Only one-third of fourth- and eighth-grade students—36 percent and 34 percent, respectively—performed at the proficient level or higher in reading, according to the most recent data, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP.⁶ Students do not close these gaps as they continue in the K-12 system. Only 38 percent of high school seniors are proficient in reading according to NAEP,⁷ and NAEP reading scores are even bleaker for black high school students at 16 percent, Latino students at 23 percent, and English language learners, or ELLs, at 4 percent.⁸ And while students in the fourth grade are reading on par with students in other high-performing countries,⁹ U.S. 15-year-olds rank 17th out of students in 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.¹⁰

The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects—or ELA standards for short—help address some of these readiness gaps. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia are currently in the process of implementing the state-developed ELA and math Common Core K-12 standards, which were finalized in 2010.¹¹

The ELA standards are changing how students read and write in American classrooms in some fundamental ways. Under the new standards, students are getting regular practice with complex and grade-level appropriate texts, using more informational texts, and practicing more evidence-based writing.

The ELA standards are also influencing the way teachers approach instruction to help students achieve the standards. Teachers are exposing students to grade-appropriate texts. They are applying instructional techniques to help students analyze and better comprehend more difficult texts. And because the Common Core ELA standards apply to a variety of disciplines, teachers across the curriculum—including history, the sciences, and technical subjects—are sharing in the responsibility for developing students' literacy skills and knowledge.

This report examines these key shifts in the ELA standards more closely, as well as the research basis for their inclusion and the potential benefits for students.

In order to fully realize the promise of more rigorous standards to help all students achieve at high levels and graduate from high school truly prepared for college and a career, the Center for American Progress offers the following recommendations to state and district leaders:

- **Push ahead with the Common Core standards and aligned assessments.** Implementation has faced its expected challenges, but hints of progress as a result of the standards are beginning to emerge. Many states are now using more robust assessments to measure student learning that are aligned to the standards, for example. Instructional practice is also changing as result, and more students are getting more exposure to informational texts and are practicing evidence-based writing.
- **Strengthen training supports for prospective and current teachers, including teachers of other subjects.** Teachers still report the need for more professional development. Noted in multiple surveys of teachers, their most pressing need is professional learning regarding how to best differentiate instruction for students at various achievement levels, students with disabilities, and ELLs.¹² In addition, guidance and training on how to best support student writing about complex issues and persuasive writing are also in great demand.¹³ Non-ELA teachers, who assume a great responsibility for students' literacy under the new standards, are especially lacking the preparation and support they need to carry out the standards effectively.
- **Ensure that teachers have access to and are using high-quality curricular materials and tools aligned to the Common Core.** The quality and alignment to the standards of most of the materials that are available to teachers has been problematic since implementation first got underway. States and districts, with teachers, need to play a more supportive role in vetting curricular materials.

The Common Core ELA standards offer educators a roadmap to arm students with the core knowledge and literacy skills they need to be prepared for college and the workplace. States should remain steadfast in their implementation of the standards and ensure that teachers have the training supports and curricular resources they need to meet the standards' instructional demands.

History of ELA standards in the United States

It is useful to begin with some historical context. While some of the key shifts in the Common Core ELA standards demand significant classroom changes, the foundations of these shifts date back to the earliest discussions on education reform.

English and the study of English literature, in particular, did not gain a firm foothold in the school curriculum until the turn of the 20th century when the National Education Association's Committee of Ten, primarily made up of higher education representatives, released its influential report on secondary school studies. That 1894 report was significant for many reasons, not least of which was to affirm that every student in the United States, "no matter what the probable destination of the pupil may be," should follow the same course of study.¹⁴

But it was also one of the first efforts to define and elevate English studies as a course of study in primary and secondary schools. According to the Committee of Ten, the study of English encompassed grammar, vocabulary, composition, rhetoric, and literature, which were often taught as disparate subjects. Specifically, the Committee of Ten believed that, "The study of literature and training in the expression of thought" should be paramount.¹⁵

At the same time the Committee of Ten was compiling its report, the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English brought together representatives of higher education organizations and college preparatory schools to develop common college admission requirements related to English.¹⁶ The National Conference produced a list of texts upon which admission to most colleges would be based. In 1894, the first list included such titles as *Ivanhoe*, *Tales of the Alhambra*, and *The House of Seven Gables*.¹⁷ The College Entrance Examination Board would then base its exams on the National Conference's list. Thus began the higher education community's influence on English studies and K-12 education in general.

More than a half century later, in 1958, scholars and professional teacher organizations from across the nation convened a series of conferences called “The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English” to identify key areas that the profession must address in order to advance English as a discipline. According to findings that came out of the conferences, designing a curriculum that was “sequential and cumulative from the kindergarten to the graduate school” topped the list.¹⁸ The conferences also raised questions about whether teaching reading and oral language skills should be solely the responsibility of English teachers and whether “national standards for student writing at the various levels [should] be established.”¹⁹

The “Basic Issues” conferees articulated specific roles for teachers, school English departments, and philanthropic foundations to each play in order to successfully address the issues that would help professionalize English instruction in schools. Notably, states would not play a critical role in this effort.²⁰

In 1961, the National Council of Teachers of English, or NCTE, issued a report that sounded the alarm bells on the status of English as a course of study in American schools. The report proclaimed that “the greatest single weakness is the lack of articulation in the teaching of English from the elementary school through the college.”²¹ The report bemoaned how “tens of thousands” of school districts developed their own English curricula and colleges developed their own entrance requirements in isolation from each other. As a result, students were graduating from high school unprepared for the college-level English classroom.

In response, that same year, the U.S. Congress authorized federal funding for Project English, which helped to establish a dozen curriculum study centers at major universities. According to education scholar Arthur Applebee, the centers “produced the first sets of academically oriented material for the high school [English] course.”²²

But it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that states and the federal government began to actively develop grade-level expectations for students. Spurred by the preeminent 1983 “A Nation at Risk” report, which called for the adoption of “more rigorous and measurable standards,” several states—such as California, Massachusetts, and Texas—heeded the call and invested state dollars to develop their curricular standards.²³

President George H.W. Bush tried to capitalize on this momentum by financing a variety of professional organizations to develop voluntary standards in a range of subjects, including English. The administration hoped that these standards would serve as a model for states.²⁴ The NCTE and the International Reading

Association, or IRA, guided the ELA efforts. Discontent with the progress of the NCTE and the IRA, however, the U.S. Department of Education eventually rescinded the grant, and the two organizations completed the project with their own resources.²⁵ When they revealed their standards in 1996, many criticized their work, calling the standards too vague. *The New York Times* ran an editorial titled “How Not to Write English” that stated: “A curriculum guide for teaching English has just been released in a tongue barely recognizable as English.”²⁶ When the next wave of states developed their own standards, spurred by President Bill Clinton’s Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the 1994 Improving America’s Schools Act—which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, or ESEA—few referred to the NCTE-IRA standards.²⁷

By 1998, 43 states had developed standards in three or more subjects.²⁸ In one of the first reviews of states’ standards, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute recognized Massachusetts for its exemplary ELA standards. Among its merits, the Fordham Institute found that the Bay State’s English standards were written clearly and included examples of specific texts for standards at each grade level to indicate expected reading level. One downside of the Massachusetts standards, however, was that they did not sufficiently address the role of informational reading—reading of expository texts such as nonfiction, scientific journals, and news articles—in the upper grades.²⁹

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, the 2001 reauthorization of ESEA, states got even more serious about ELA and math standards. In reading, states honed in on standards in grades three through eight, as well as early reading standards.³⁰ Furthermore, a greater number of states moved toward grade-specific standards instead of clumping several grade bands together.³¹ However, much of this progress was undermined by weak ELA standards at the secondary level. A 2005 Fordham Institute review of states’ ELA standards found that standards for high schools were “content-light” and “unteachable.”³²

The ACT came to a similar conclusion. Its analysis found that 29 states did not have grade-specific standards beyond the eighth grade. For example, 20 states applied one set of reading standards to grades nine through twelve, overlooking how proficiency in reading should increase as students approach graduation.³³

The Common Core ELA state standards

In 2009, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and nearly all of the states came together to develop common standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects and mathematics. Early drafts of the ELA standards, which were released for public comment, were critiqued for being unclear and cumbersome.³⁴ There was also demand for a comprehensive list of exemplary texts to demonstrate the degree of complexity students should be able to navigate. Some thought that the standards should include a defined book list.³⁵ Others wanted more clarity regarding the issue of text complexity, a broader range of samples to demonstrate the writing standards, and adjustments to the manner in which the English standards organized grade levels.³⁶

The final version of the standards, released in 2010, ultimately placed a greater emphasis on the usage of technical materials, world literature, and methods to evaluate text complexity compared with the original draft.³⁷ The list of exemplar texts was beefed up from 4 to approximately 150 selections. And while there is no defined book list across grades, the standards do include four required texts for high school students: the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and President Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address.³⁸

The Common Core ELA standards identify the core knowledge and skills in four areas that students need to be college and career ready:

1. Reading, including literature and informational text across all grades and foundational skills in grades kindergarten through five
2. Writing
3. Speaking and listening
4. Language

The ELA standards are composed of anchor standards that represent broad literacy expectations aligned to college and career readiness. Meanwhile, grade-specific standards outline more specifically how the expectations for each anchor standard should be applied at each individual grade level in grades kindergarten through eight and in two-year bands in grades 9 through 12. According to the authors of the standards, the grade bands in high school offer flexibility in course design.³⁹

The ELA standards expect literacy to be a school-wide responsibility. Therefore, the grade 6 through grade 12 sections are organized into two components: one for English language arts teachers and the other for teachers of history, science, and technical subjects. Because most students in grades kindergarten through five receive all of their instruction across the entire curriculum from one teacher, these grade standards are organized together as one section.

Overall, the Common Core ELA standards are better than what preceded them in most states. The Fordham Institute reviewed the new standards alongside states' standards when the Common Core standards were first finalized and determined that the Common Core ELA standards were "clearly superior" to those on the books in 37 states.⁴⁰ In general, states with less robust ELA expectations had standards that overly relied on reading strategies instead of content, were not genre-specific for reading and writing, neglected American literature, provided little guidance regarding what students should be reading, and had unclear writing expectations.⁴¹

More than 40 states have chosen to adopt and implement the Common Core standards, including Minnesota, which is only pursuing the ELA standards. Districts and schools across the country are still in the early years of implementation, and therefore, it will be some time before the full impact of the new standards is known. But some changes are immediate. The content that students are reading and writing and how teachers are approaching literacy instruction is visibly shifting. These changes are discussed in the following sections.

How the new standards are changing what students read and write

The Common Core ELA standards are revolutionary in three ways in terms of what they expect students to read and write. First, they demand increased practice with complex texts, and they push teachers to ensure that students are working with grade-level appropriate texts. Second, the standards expect students to read more informational texts across the curriculum. Finally, the new standards require that students practice more persuasive writing based on evidence from what they read.

Regular practice with complex and grade-level appropriate texts

One of the most significant features of the new ELA standards is the expectation that all students will read more challenging and complex texts, both literary and informational. And the standards get specific about how challenging the reading should be at each grade level.

Prior to the Common Core, none of the standards in any of the states addressed grade-level expectations for text complexity.⁴² This is currently the case in Virginia, which did not adopt the Common Core. For example, one of Virginia's third-grade reading standards says, "The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional text and poetry."⁴³ Timothy Shanahan, a literacy expert at the University of Illinois at Chicago, likens this to requiring all students to do bench presses but making no mention of how much resistance or how many repetitions to work toward.⁴⁴ Compare this with Common Core ELA reading standard 10 in literature for students in the third grade: "By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 2–3 text complexity band independently and proficiently."⁴⁵

There is good reason to focus on text complexity. According to research conducted by the ACT, the ability to navigate text complexity is the “clearest differentiator” in determining college readiness in reading.⁴⁶ Research also indicates that even struggling readers—with some support—demonstrate greater progress in reading when exposed to more challenging texts.⁴⁷

What makes text complex?

- Subtle and/or frequent transitions
- Multiple and/or subtle themes and purposes
- Density of information
- Unfamiliar settings, topics, or events
- Lack of repetition, overlap, or similarity in words and sentences
- Complex sentences
- Uncommon vocabulary
- Lack of words, sentences, or paragraphs that review or pull things together
- Longer paragraphs
- Any text structure that is less narrative and/or mixes genres

Determining the complexity of a given text

The ELA standards call for a three-pronged approach to evaluating a text’s complexity:

1. *Qualitative factors:* These components of text complexity include the evaluation of a text’s meaning or purpose, its structure, the conventionality of the language, and the amount of background knowledge that a reader needs to fully understand a text. A human reader is in the best position to assess these factors.
2. *Quantitative factors:* These aspects of text complexity include formulaic factors, such as word length, word frequency, sentence length, and text length, that can affect the readability of a text. Recent research has identified six text analyzer tools that educators can reliably use to measure the quantitative elements of text complexity.
3. *Reader and task considerations:* Teachers are encouraged to consider how factors specific to the student may affect text complexity. This could include, for example, a student’s motivation or interest in the content and his or her knowledge and experiences. The student’s purpose when reading a text—whether a student is skimming a text or deeply studying it, for example—also has implications for a text’s complexity.⁴⁸

Yet students have not received adequate exposure to complex texts. Pointing to a compelling body of research, the authors of the Common Core standards argue that K-12 texts have become easier, though there is some debate about this.⁴⁹ Whether the perceived decline in K-12 text difficulty is real or not, there is a sizeable gap in the difficulty between high school texts and those that students will use after high school, be it in the workplace or in a higher education setting. Students at the reading level required for the average high school text may only be able to adequately comprehend one-fourth of the reading found in military and workplace texts and only 5 percent of college texts.⁵⁰

English language learners have long lacked access to content rigor. Often, districts and schools make the mistake of prioritizing English language development at the expense of academic content.⁵¹ For example, researchers recently found that nearly one-third of middle school ELLs in one California district are not even enrolled in an ELA course.⁵² Their enrollment in an English language development class is commonly substituted for ELA classes despite their differing curricula and purposes.⁵³ For these students, the standards' emphasis on grade-level text complexity is a great opportunity because research indicates literacy instruction that is grounded in academic content is most effective in developing English literacy.⁵⁴

In addition, for decades, it's become common instructional practice to assign texts to students based on their instructional reading level instead of their grade level.⁵⁵ This approach theorizes that students are more likely to experience more growth by reading texts that just slightly stretch their reading skills but not so much that they become discouraged.

But the evidence base for this approach is thin. According to Shanahan, who reviewed the evidence supporting leveled-reading, the research claims “have been tainted by selective citing (cherry picking studies to support the claims); mischaracterization (making claims the researcher never did); overgeneralization (ignoring the limitations specified by the researcher); and the citing of expert opinions as if they were research findings.”⁵⁶ Another group of literacy experts came to a similar conclusion after conducting their own investigation of the research base: “We could not find any compelling studies suggesting that leveled texts beyond the primary years resulted in significant gains in achievement.”⁵⁷

Research on early implementation of the standards indicates that teachers are still warming to the idea of using grade-level texts. This is especially true of elementary teachers and teachers of high-poverty students and ELLs. According to a Fordham

Institute survey, 64 percent of elementary teachers report assigning texts based on instructional reading level, while this is only true of 38 percent and 24 percent of middle and high school teachers, respectively.⁵⁸ A recent RAND Corporation report echoes these findings.⁵⁹ It also found that 58 percent of ELA teachers who serve higher shares of ELLs and 51 percent of ELA teachers in higher-poverty schools report daily or almost daily use of leveled reading, compared with 33 percent of teachers with a smaller proportion of ELLs in their classrooms and 36 percent of teachers in lower-poverty schools.⁶⁰

Evidently, teachers need increased guidance and support to make the switch to grade-level reading. This report explores the strategies that educators are using to help their students tackle greater text complexity and grade-level texts later in this report.

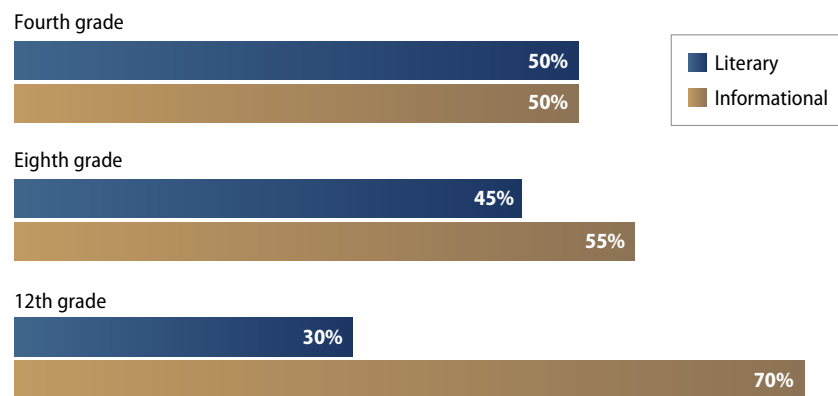
Increased use of informational texts

Traditionally, informational texts have not made up a substantial proportion of students' reading material in school, especially in the early grades.⁶¹ Prior to the Common Core, for example, only 7 percent of what students read in elementary school and 15 percent in middle school was expository text, or text that conveys information or explains a subject.⁶² The Common Core ELA standards aim to infuse more reading and analysis of informational texts across the entire curriculum—not just in English classes. Under the standards, informational texts include literary non-fiction, such as biographies and books about history.⁶³ They also include technical texts, as well as information presented in the form of graphs, charts, and maps.

The Common Core ELA standards recommend that students in the primary grades spend an equal amount of time using literary and informational texts for reading and writing and gradually tilt toward more use of informational texts in the higher grades. This recommendation is based on the distribution of informational text in the National Assessment of Educational Progress reading assessment framework. (see Figure 1)

FIGURE 1

Percentage distribution of literary and informational passages in NAEP reading assessment, by grade



Source: National Assessment Governing Board, *Reading Framework for the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), p. 11.

Why the focus on informational text? Reading informational and literary texts requires distinct comprehension skills for each. Illustrations and pictures, for example, are used in different ways. These nonprint features are not typically essential for comprehending literature, but they are often included in informational texts to support a reader’s comprehension of the subject matter.⁶⁴ Proficient readers and writers adjust to both forms of text. According to the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the NAEP assessments, “Skilled writers understand that different kinds of text need different structural patterns, and good readers are able to use these specific text features as aids in comprehension.”⁶⁵

Familiarizing students with more informational texts is also practical. Most of the reading that students encounter in college and the workplace is informational in structure, and therefore, students should be adept at using such text.⁶⁶

In addition, some research speculates that the dearth of informational texts used in schools is somewhat to blame for poor reading achievement scores.⁶⁷ This may be partially due to the way readers interact with and process informational text compared with the more familiar narrative text. Informational reading tends to have more uncommon words and be more inherently complex than narrative text, encompassing all the benefits of working with complex text more regularly.

Offering students greater practice with informational texts also invites greater access to knowledge across the curriculum, including science and history. As the College Board’s president David Coleman describes, “The core standards are a chance to regain the proper role of the elementary school teacher, to bring their students into the world, to spend equal time on informational and story, and in that way build a real foundation for literacy.”⁶⁸

Critics have condemned the Common Core ELA standards for what is perceived as a decreased emphasis on literature.⁶⁹ But these critiques are unfounded. The Common Core ELA standards are clear on where in the curriculum schools should increase the use of informational texts:

*Because the ELA classroom must focus on literature (stories, drama, and poetry) as well as literary nonfiction, a great deal of informational reading in grades 6–12 must take place in other classes if the NAEP assessment framework is to be matched instructionally.*⁷⁰

The standards further clarify that the 50 percent to 70 percent distribution of informational text reading refers to “the sum of student reading, not just reading in ELA settings.”⁷¹

Several studies have demonstrated that students are reading more nonfiction since the Common Core standards were first implemented.⁷² Many schools are seizing the emphasis on nonfiction reading to organize interdisciplinary lessons for students that work across various subjects.⁷³ The result is a more project-based learning approach to instruction that allows students to see the connections across disciplines.

Evidenced-based writing across the curriculum

The ELA standards place a renewed emphasis on writing across the curriculum. In the pre-Common Core era, primary school teachers reported spending, on average, less than 30 minutes per day on writing instruction. Story writing, letter writing, and journal writing were among the most common types of activities, while persuasive writing fell near the bottom of the list.⁷⁴ Analytical writing at the high school level was also rare.⁷⁵

The standards' focus on writing is well warranted. Writing is an essential skill in most salaried occupations, and many companies report that poor writing skills will deter them from hiring a candidate.⁷⁶

In school, writing has also been shown to enhance content learning.⁷⁷ This is true across a variety of content areas and grade levels. In addition, students also improve their reading skills and comprehension when they write about the texts they read, when they learn about the process of writing, and when they increase the amount of time they spend on writing.⁷⁸

The new standards promote the development of three types of writing: writing to persuade, termed argument/persuasive; to inform, termed explanatory; and to communicate an experience, termed narrative.⁷⁹ In particular, the ELA standards encourage writing that is grounded in evidence. Persuasive and explanatory writing should make up a greater proportion of the high school curriculum than narrative writing assignments, according to the standards.⁸⁰ This is a marked shift from states' previous ELA standards.

The Common Core ELA standards also underscore the importance of teaching writing across the curriculum. This is in line with the 2003 National Commission on Writing, which declared, "Writing is everybody's business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels."⁸¹

New assessments that two state consortia have developed to align to the Common Core standards also elevate the role of writing in an unprecedented way. The tests designed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, shift away from a heavy reliance on multiple-choice questions. Instead, the tests include performance-based items that require students to write text-based responses. In fact, both consortia's tests really shine in this regard, not only in comparison with states' pre-Common Core tests but also when weighed against assessments that states are currently opting to use in place of the Smarter Balanced Assessment and PARCC tests.⁸² The ACT Aspire assessment, for example, does not require students to use evidence from sources when writing.⁸³

10th-grade research and writing assessment task

PARCC released actual test items that were included in the 2015 assessment period. Below is a research and writing task that was included in the grade 10 ELA assessment. The exercise illustrates several features of the writing standards, such as demonstrating explanatory writing and drawing evidence from informational texts.

You have just read and listened to three texts that present Franklin Delano Roosevelt's ideas. The three texts are:

- "The Forgotten Man," a speech delivered by Roosevelt on April 7, 1932
- A passage from "Inaugural Address," a speech delivered by Roosevelt on March 4, 1933
- A video clip concerning Roosevelt's "New Deal" programs

Consider the points made by each text about Roosevelt's plans for and beliefs regarding the future of the United States.

Write an essay exploring Roosevelt's view of the most critical challenges facing the United States during the Great Depression and in what way Roosevelt believed that his proposed solutions differed from those attempted by others. Your essay should consider at least **two** of the texts that you have read. Remember to use textual evidence to support your ideas.⁸⁴

The writing standards are already making their mark in many schools. For example, 86 percent of teachers in five Common Core states—Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Nevada—report that they have assigned more writing that requires students to cite evidence.⁸⁵ But the increased emphasis on writing instruction is also unearthing some pressing professional development needs. Teachers—especially non-ELA teachers—report needing more professional training to teach writing.⁸⁶ States and districts will have to address this gap as they move forward with implementation of the standards.

How the new standards are changing the way teachers teach

The Common Core ELA standards' keen focus on working with challenging text and teaching evidence-based writing across the entire curriculum is prompting educators to rethink some of their instructional practices. Some of the more significant ways in which instruction is changing in schools are in the manner in which teachers are making complex and grade-level text accessible to students through close reading, which is explained below. The standards are also challenging the way schools have traditionally approached reading and writing by calling on all teachers, regardless of discipline, to play an active role in teaching reading and writing.

Reading, reading, and more reading

With the standards' focus on text complexity, nonfiction, and grade-level texts, educators are turning to close reading to help their students navigate more challenging texts. Close reading is a pedagogical approach that has become strongly associated with the Common Core ELA standards, but it was first popularized during the New Critics movement of the mid-20th century.⁸⁷ As the term implies, close reading involves the careful dissection of text, paying special attention to sentence structure and word choice, with little background knowledge about the text. It is an exercise in appreciating the text itself.

This is a dramatic shift for today's educators who are accustomed to previewing texts and providing some context or background on the subject to make the text more accessible to students and to enhance comprehension.⁸⁸ In its purest form, close reading rejects the idea of building background knowledge or tapping students' existing knowledge. Instead, text-dependent questions take center stage.⁸⁹ Teachers play a critical role in guiding students through an analysis of the text by asking them questions that require students to refer to the text—repeatedly—to collect evidence in order to allow students to form their own interpretations of the text.

Formulating the appropriate types of questions that will invite a deeper understanding of the text is extremely challenging, and some district leaders have questioned whether teachers are adequately prepared for this role.⁹⁰ Often, teachers' questions have tended to focus on identifying "surface features of the text," such as the plot and main characters.⁹¹ While the answers to these questions are found in the text, these are not the ambitious types of questions that close reading promotes.

Several professional development initiatives across the country are underway to support teachers throughout this transition. For example, researchers at Pennsylvania State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are developing a set of videotaped model lessons as well as an instrument that teachers can use to evaluate their inquiry techniques.⁹² Researchers at Pittsburgh's Learning Research and Development Center developed an eight-week online professional development program that trains teachers how to select appropriate texts for close reading in the classroom. The training also helps teachers formulate text-based questions and identify stopping points in texts to raise those questions.⁹³

Some educators are appropriately concerned about how the shift to complex texts and less focus on building background knowledge might affect struggling students.⁹⁴ Yet some research indicates that close reading techniques are benefiting ELLs, for example. A pilot study of a close reading training course for teachers in Philadelphia found that ELLs using the technique are demonstrating larger improvements in reading comprehension than other students using the technique.⁹⁵ Researchers surmise that the greater focus on academic vocabulary and its connection to the text is helping ELLs.⁹⁶

And in New York, some ELLs who are engaged in close reading of complex text spend 20 minutes per day analyzing just one sentence of text. As a result, these ELLs are passing the state's English language proficiency test in greater numbers and are even outperforming non-ELLs on the state's ELA assessment.⁹⁷

Building background knowledge—a good or bad thing?

Close reading purists reject the use of previewing text and activating or building students' background knowledge. Although intended to fill in knowledge gaps that might limit reading comprehension, pre-reading preparation activities have become a routine element of reading lessons, even when they are not necessary. They also eat up class time and can be counterproductive if too much of the text is previewed and the student is left with little to gain from actually reading the text.

But there is some debate about the importance of background knowledge and its place in close reading.⁹⁸ Catherine Snow, Harvard language and literacy expert, questions the use of “cold close reading,” or “reading a text without having been warmed up in any way to the topic or the task.”⁹⁹ Without providing students with some context to an unfamiliar, complex text, Snow argues that students will be less motivated to read it or will become frustrated.

Background knowledge might be especially necessary for struggling readers accessing complex texts, including ELLs.¹⁰⁰ Some argue that background knowledge is even more important than reading skills. In an interview with National Public Radio, University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham said, “Kids who, on standard reading tests, show themselves to be poor readers, when you give them a text that’s on a topic they happen to know a whole lot about, they suddenly look like terrific readers.”¹⁰¹

And while the standards discourage a leveled reading approach for the primary purpose of instruction, this approach can play a useful role in building students’ background knowledge.¹⁰² The more students read, the more their knowledge of various subjects is broadened. Therefore, educators may find that a good way to build students’ background knowledge is by helping students select texts that they can comfortably read independently. In turn, this can help students when they face more challenging texts in the classroom.

In short, building or tapping into students’ background knowledge can complement close reading strategies if done well. Activating background knowledge should focus on the gaps that will help students appreciate the text without pushing it aside.

Sharing responsibility for literacy development across the curriculum

The ELA standards are resolute in their perspective: Literacy development is a responsibility that is shared by teachers of all disciplines.¹⁰³ Teachers of math, science, history, and other technical subjects are expected to play a significant role in building content knowledge through the reading of informational texts. Therefore, while the standards emphasize more engagement with nonfiction and informational texts, students will primarily obtain access to these texts outside of their English studies.

The Common Core standards expect that students will develop proficient disciplinary literacy skills. In particular, students who are college and career ready should adeptly respond to the literacy demands of various disciplines. They should appreciate each discipline’s literacy norms and conventions and comprehend uncommon or more technical vocabulary.¹⁰⁴

Disciplinary literacy differs from content-area literacy. The differences between the two types of literacy are not well understood and are often referenced interchangeably. But the distinction is important. As literacy expert Timothy Shanahan explains:

*The idea of disciplinary literacy is that students not only have to learn the essential content of a field, but how reading and writing are used in that field. On the other hand, content area reading focuses on imparting reading and study skills that may help students to better understand and remember whatever they read.*¹⁰⁵

The evidence base for emphasizing disciplinary literacy over content-area literacy is not well developed. However, literacy experts believe that teaching disciplinary literacy holds greater promise because it has the potential to benefit both struggling and proficient readers.¹⁰⁶ Content-area literacy, on the other hand, generally focuses on developing traditional reading skills that are applicable to other disciplines and appears to primarily benefit struggling readers.¹⁰⁷ In addition, non-ELA teachers are more likely to embrace the task of teaching disciplinary literacy since they may perceive such reading skills to be integral to their role as subject area experts.¹⁰⁸

Supporting students’ literacy development is mostly a new role for non-ELA teachers. Many of these teachers lack the preparation to effectively assume this responsibility. In a 2015 survey of teachers in Common Core states, one-quarter of non-ELA teachers who reported that they were expected to address the ELA standards said that they were “unfamiliar or only slightly familiar” with the standards, and another 37 percent said that they had a “general understanding [of the standards] without the details.”¹⁰⁹ In addition, the majority of non-ELA teachers—55 percent—reported feeling “not at all prepared” or only “slightly prepared” to support students meet the ELA standards.¹¹⁰

The areas in which non-ELA teachers in Common Core states reported needing the most support were helping students with their argument writing; selecting complex texts that are appropriate for the whole class; reading and writing grounded in evidence from the text; and building students’ discipline-specific vocabulary.¹¹¹

Across the country, several initiatives are underway that aim to support teacher practice in disciplinary literacy. The Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas, for example, works with teachers to help them present content-rich information to students of all academic levels. The Center for Research and Learning has helped teachers develop instructional routines that assist students in building background information related to the subject matter so that they can more easily navigate classroom texts.¹¹² And WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative helps develop reading apprenticeships where students model discipline-specific literacy skills. Randomized controlled studies have demonstrated that students who are taught with this approach score more than a year ahead of other students across a broad range of subjects.¹¹³

Common Core reading and writing across the curriculum

The guidance to educators below, which comes from the New York City Department of Education, demonstrates how studying the same text serves different purposes in the ELA classroom and the non-ELA classroom.

Focus of understanding using Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech

In the ELA classroom

While studying author’s craft, students read Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech to deepen their understanding of metaphor and tone. Students then write an informative essay exploring how Dr. King uses figurative language to advance his argument.

In the social studies classroom

During a unit on the Civil Rights movement, students conduct a close reading of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, analyzing King’s argument and evidence. Students then write an argumentative essay comparing the effectiveness of King’s argumentative and leadership tactics to those of other leaders of the Civil Rights movement.

Text-based writing using *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*

In the ELA classroom

After reading chapter 8 of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: The Secrets Behind What you Eat* (Young Readers Edition) and an excerpt from Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, students write an informative essay in which they analyze how the authors organized and developed their arguments on the role of food production in American society.

In the science classroom

After reading chapter 8 of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: The Secrets Behind What you Eat* (Young Readers Edition), students write an informative essay in which they analyze how human consumption of resources impacts the environment and our health. This writing illuminates the required science knowledge of the discipline as outlined in the State content standards.¹¹⁴

The path forward: A few recommendations

Most of the instructional shifts required by the Common Core ELA standards are not particularly novel. The use of close reading techniques that encourage students to focus deeply on the text, for example, predated the standards by decades. Similarly, the standards' emphasis on informational texts follows that of the National Assessment of Educational Progress assessment framework, which establishes that proficient readers have the agility to navigate both literary and informational texts.

The motivation to refocus attention on these approaches is informed by the most recent research, as well as the practical demands that students encounter after high school. Students' ability to manage text complexity, for example, is a key characteristic of college and career readiness, according to the ACT's research. Moreover, students will ultimately have to read and use more complex texts, as well as informational texts, in college and the workplace, and they will have to do so independently. The standards' focus on disciplinary literacy and a school-wide responsibility for literacy development in grades 6 through 12 is intended to help ensure that students graduate high school with a more meaningful grasp of each discipline's literacy demands, which can ultimately help students develop a more authentic knowledge of core subjects.

It has been nearly six years since states first began to adopt the Common Core standards. While the standards have their critics and states have faced some considerable implementation challenges, most states have largely stayed the course. Even states that have repealed the Common Core standards have ultimately not veered very far away from the standards themselves.¹¹⁵

CAP's review of the research base supporting the Common Core ELA standards underscores their promise in preparing students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the workplace. States and districts, however, need to make smart adjustments to ensure the successful implementation of the standards at the classroom level.

CAP identifies the following three key recommendations.

Push ahead with the Common Core standards and aligned assessments

While a few states have since decided to move away from the standards, nearly all states have weathered the predictably challenging early years of implementation and are continuing with the Common Core. Students, teachers, and schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia are operating under extraordinarily different expectations than they were six years ago.

The standards are already having an impact in the classroom. Instructional practice is changing. Eighty-six percent of ELA teachers say that they have increased the amount of evidence-based writing that they have assigned to their students.¹¹⁶ And a similar share of teachers are assigning more informational and nonfiction texts.¹¹⁷

The true impact of the Common Core remains to be seen in whether more students graduate from high school ready for college and the workplace. But there are other hints of progress that are beginning to emerge. Many states are now using more robust assessments to measure student learning that are aligned to the standards. A review of the new ELA assessments, for example, found that the PARCC test, followed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment test, most closely matches the content and depth of the ELA standards.¹¹⁸ And in a move that particularly demonstrates the roles of the new standards and tests in preparing students for college, institutions of higher education have begun to use results from the PARCC and Smarter Balanced Assessment tests in their placement decisions.¹¹⁹

Support for the standards and their goals remain strong. The public continues to overwhelmingly support the goals of the Common Core.¹²⁰ And educators, including ELA teachers, believe that the standards will make a difference in their students' learning. School leaders in the five previously mentioned Common Core states report that 74 percent of their ELA teachers have either “fully embraced” or “embraced quite a bit” the new standards.¹²¹

The transition has not been easy. More work must be done to ensure that teachers have the support they need to help students meet the expectations of the standards. But states, districts, and schools must press on. As the poor reading performance outcomes discussed earlier show, there is little to gain from moving backwards.

Strengthen training supports for prospective and current teachers, including teachers of other subjects

According to a recent survey, 90 percent of ELA teachers feel moderately or well prepared to teach to the ELA standards.¹²² They have received substantial professional development related to the standards, especially with respect to the content of the ELA standards and the use of data to inform instruction.¹²³

However, teachers still report the need for more training. Among the support that all teachers say they most need is professional learning related to how best to differentiate instruction for students at various achievement levels, students with disabilities, and English language learners.¹²⁴ This finding is echoed in multiple surveys of teachers. In addition, guidance and training on how to best support student writing on complex issues and persuasive writing are also in great demand.¹²⁵

Cross-disciplinary literacy standards are a key feature of the ELA standards. Yet non-ELA teachers, in particular, do not feel as prepared to help students meet the new English standards.¹²⁶ Subject-area teachers need support to learn how to best approach disciplinary literacy in their classrooms since it is from this disciplinary perspective that the standards approach literacy in subjects outside of English and reading.

As highlighted earlier, several efforts are underway to help educators teach disciplinary literacy, including WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative and the work that is taking place at the University of Kansas' Center for Research on Learning. In addition, a CAP report studying six school districts that have adopted collaborative approaches with teachers unions demonstrates how providing teachers with meaningful leadership opportunities can improve professional development and teacher collaboration related to the Common Core.¹²⁷ Such opportunities, for example, can include a role in district or school governance or working with the district or union on a special assignment to improve teacher practice.

Finally, teacher preparation programs bear a great deal of responsibility for ensuring that new teachers are prepared to lead the Common Core classroom. But reading instruction is a sore point for most programs.¹²⁸ All prospective teachers, regardless of subject area, need to be trained on how best to support students' reading and writing skills.

Ensure that teachers have access and are using high-quality curricular materials and tools that are aligned to the Common Core

A Center for Economic and Policy Research survey of teachers found that 72 percent of ELA teachers report that they have changed at least half of their materials to address the Common Core ELA standards.¹²⁹ Most ELA teachers use materials that they develop themselves, but they also turn to their districts and external organizations, such as commercial publishers.¹³⁰ New York’s EngageNY curricular materials have served as valuable resources for teachers inside and outside the state,¹³¹ and a review of its ELA curricula found that its alignment to the standards was generally strong.¹³²

However, the quality and alignment of most of the materials that are available to teachers have been a thorny issue since implementation first began. In a 2014 Education Week Research Center national survey of teachers, 41 percent of teachers reported that their textbooks and curricular materials were not aligned with the Common Core.¹³³ In addition, according to a 2014 commentary authored by former California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, only one-third of the state’s districts had “created a scope and sequence for the Common Core standards in *either English Language Arts or mathematics for at least some grades*,” and one-quarter did not have any plans to engage in this work.¹³⁴

States and school districts, in conjunction with teachers, need to play a more supportive role in vetting curricular materials. As an example, Louisiana has conducted a review of a number of instructional materials to verify their alignment with the state’s Common Core standards.¹³⁵ The state has categorized materials into three tiers of quality, from meeting all of the state’s nonnegotiable criteria and demonstrating indicators of quality across the board to not meeting the state’s nonnegotiable criteria. Ultimately the state leaves the selection of instructional materials up to the districts, but this provides them with meaningful guidance. Some districts are enlisting the services of external reviewers, such as for-profit LearningList and nonprofit EdReports.org, to conduct independent reviews of instructional materials.¹³⁶

In addition, teachers—especially elementary teachers and teachers in schools with large enrollments of ELLs and high-poverty students—need to be encouraged to use grade-level texts for reading assignments, as the standards require. As noted earlier, teachers working with these students are still largely assigning texts based on instructional reading level.¹³⁷ Encouraging grade-level reading is a core element of the new standards.

Conclusion

Under the new Common Core ELA standards, students are encountering more challenging and complex texts. But they are also learning the skills that are needed to dissect, analyze, and comprehend such texts so that they are more adequately prepared for the heavy independent reading they will likely encounter in college.

K-12 students are likely reading more nonfiction and informational texts and practicing more evidenced-based writing than before the Common Core. This will ultimately benefit students given that this is the type of reading and writing that most will encounter in college and on the job. And with both ELA and non-ELA teachers sharing in students' literacy development, students will develop a more thorough understanding of core content across the curriculum.

It is clear that the new standards are already making a mark—not only in ELA classrooms but in history, science, and other subjects as well. However, it is equally evident that the transition to the new standards continues to leave teachers feeling that they are less prepared than they should be and lacking the necessary curricular resources needed to teach to the standards. It is therefore imperative that states and school districts do all that they can to address these gaps.

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