

Three Core Shifts to Deliver on the Promise of the Common Core State Standards in Literacy and Math

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The Common Core State Standards were developed through an unprecedented state-led initiative that drew on the expertise of teachers, parents, administrators, researchers and content experts from across the country. The Standards define a staircase to college and career readiness, building on the best of previous state standards and evidence from international comparisons and domestic reports and recommendations. Most states have now adopted the Standards to replace previous expectations in English language arts/literacy and mathematics.

Three core shifts in literacy and math, deeply grounded in the Standards themselves, offer a way to focus implementation on the few things that have the most significant return for students. These shifts should guide all aspects of implementing the Standards—including professional development, assessment design, and curriculum. Standards by themselves cannot raise achievement. Standards don't stay up late at night working on lesson plans, or stay after school making sure every student learns—it's teachers who do that. And standards don't implement themselves. Education leaders from the state board to the building principal must now act to make the Standards a reality in classrooms. By describing these three core shifts, we aim to ensure that expectations for teaching and learning are clear, consistent, and tightly aligned to the goals of the Standards themselves.

The English Language Arts & Literacy Standards: Reading and Writing Grounded in Evidence from Rich, Complex Texts

The English Language Arts & Literacy Standards provide a clear progression of learning goals in reading, writing, speaking, and listening for teachers of ELA as well as science, social studies, and technical subjects. These learning goals build a staircase of increasing complexity with the aim of preparing all students for success in college and careers by the end of high school. This is not the case today; only 35 percent of U.S. 12th graders scored at or above the “proficient” level on the NAEP reading test in 2005.[1] Only 1 in 10 8th graders are on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate from high school.[2] The Standards attempt to address our lagging performance with three key shifts.

1. *Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction*

The evidence is strikingly clear that reading content-rich nonfiction about history, social studies, science and the arts in elementary school is critical for later reading growth and achievement. Research shows that students need to be grounded in information about the world around them in order to develop a strong general knowledge and vocabulary that is necessary for becoming a successful reader. However, today students read overwhelmingly stories in elementary school; on average, less than 10 percent of elementary ELA texts are nonfiction.[3]

To be clear, literature plays an essential role in cultivating students' reading skills and developing their love of reading, and the Standards celebrate the role literature plays in building knowledge and creativity in students. The Standards therefore strongly recommend that all students equally read rich literature in elementary school

as well as content-rich nonfiction. In later grades, the Standards empower history, social studies, and science teachers to equip students with the skills needed in college to read and gain information from content-specific nonfiction texts.

The Standards emphasize careful reading—the close rereading of texts to ensure understanding—so the quality of texts that student encounter also matters. To become prepared for career and college, students must wrestle with a wide variety of high quality texts from across diverse genres, cultures, and eras. These excellent texts model for students the type of thinking and writing that they should aspire to in their own work.[4]

2. *Reading and writing grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational*

The Common Core State Standards place a premium on writing to sources by using *evidence* from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from prior knowledge or experiences, the Standards prioritize questions that require students to have read a text or texts with care. That is, student must be able to answer a range of questions using evidence and inferences drawn from the text itself. The Standards also require the cultivation of narrative writing throughout the grades. Narrative writing enables students to develop a command of sequence and detail that is an essential component of the argumentative and informative writing that predominates in later grades.

The Standards' focus on evidence-based writing to inform and persuade is a significant change from current practice. Today, the most popular forms of writing in K-12 are based on student experiences and opinion—which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college and career. In a project by professors in Minnesota that rated the college-readiness of high school students' writing, student chose overwhelmingly to submit personal narratives or opinions and the professors overwhelmingly judged the writing as “not college ready.”

3. *Regular practice with complex texts and its syntax and vocabulary*

Text complexity is a main focus of the Common Core because the ability to comprehend complex text is the most significant factor differentiating college-ready from non-college-ready readers. The Standards therefore build a staircase of increasing complexity in the texts that students are expected to read in order to prepare them for the demands of college and careers.

The complexity of text is determined by a number of factors, including syntax (i.e. sentence structure) and vocabulary. In order to achieve a command of complex materials, students must be able to access the key academic vocabulary common to those texts.[5] For this reason, the Standards require a focus on the academic vocabulary that appears commonly across genres and content areas and which is essential for understanding (e.g. *ignite* and *commit*).

[1] NAEP, “Nation’s Report Card” 2005

[2] ACT, *Forgotten Middle: Improving Readiness for High School*, 2008

[3] Educational Leadership; *The Case for Informational Text*, 2004

[4] Coleman, *Ibid*.

[5] ACT, *Forgotten Middle: Improving Readiness for High School*, 2008