

# Common Core • English Language Arts

## DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

*Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects.* June 2, 2010.  
Accessed from: <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/english-language-arts-standards>

## Overview

The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* seek to provide “the next generation of K-12 standards in order to ensure that all students are college- and career-ready in literacy no later than the end of high school.”<sup>1</sup> Fordham reviewed an earlier draft of these standards in March 2010, and a number of improvements have been made since that iteration.<sup>2</sup>



Clarity and Specificity:	2/3
Content and Rigor:	6/7
<b>Total Score:</b>	<b>8/10</b>

These final standards indeed reflect a thoughtful attempt to define skills in each area of English language arts, (ELA) as well as an effort to define how those skills might be nurtured in “history/social studies, science and technical subjects.” Although they would be more helpful to teachers if they attended as systematically to content as they do to skills, especially in the area of reading, the standards—accompanied by a well-aligned and content-rich curriculum—could provide a valuable tool to classroom teachers.

## General Organization

The document includes two categories of standards. The first is a list of “College and Career Readiness” (CCR) standards in each of four strands (reading, writing, listening and speaking, and language). These CCR standards are broad statements about what students should know and be able to do in each strand by the time they graduate from high school. The second category includes grade-appropriate learning expectations for each grade, K-12. These expectations are designed to provide “additional specificity” by translating the CCR standards into detailed, grade-specific learning objectives.

In grades 6-12, the standards also include a section devoted to “literacy for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects,” which breaks the reading and writing CCRs into grade-level expectations for history and science teachers. (Note, though, that this review focuses on the core standards for ELA.)

Finally, the standards include three appendices. The first provides definitions of text complexity, more detailed guidance about early reading foundations, and definitions of text types. The second lists “exemplar” literary and informational texts by grade spans, as well as “sample performance tasks,” which describe suggested instructional activities involving some of the cited texts. The third provides annotated student writing samples that demonstrate what kind of writing is expected of students at each grade. The appendices must be considered components of the standards themselves in order for the standards to be effective.

## Clarity and Specificity

For the most part, the standards are fairly specific about the skills that students should master each year, as in the following examples:

Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events) (grade 3)

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used (grades 11-12)

In other places, however, the language of the standards is a bit bloated or confusing, as in this vocabulary standard:

Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., quizzed, whined, stammered) and that are basic to a particular topic (e.g., wildlife, conservation, and endangered when discussing animal preservation) (grade 4)

It is hard to imagine which words are not included in this all-encompassing standard, and it is not clear how using words “that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being” should be counted among “general academic” and “domain-specific” words. Moreover, what is the expected student outcome here, and how could it be measured?

Similarly puzzling standards can be found here and there, including the following:

With some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting (grade 5)

How would a teacher measure students’ “interacting and collaborating with others”? Are students collaborating with others to produce and publish writing or for some other purpose?

In the following conventions standard, it is difficult to determine how a teacher would use this directive to drive instruction:

Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations (grades 9-10)

This standard implies that a writer can “add interest” simply by using different phrases and clauses. Most uninteresting sentences, by virtue of being sentences, have phrases and clauses. Sometimes, interest is much better generated with simple, straightforward language. Encouraging students to overcomplicate their sentences to make them seem more interesting seems like confusing, if not misguided, advice. Depending on the genre, word choice might, for example, be a better technique than sentence construction for “adding interest.” It looks as though this standard is designed to unnecessarily rationalize the study of “clauses and phrases” by assigning it an artificial purpose.

In other cases, the language is repeated verbatim across grades, for example:

Provide an objective summary of the text (grades 7-12)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings... (grades 6-12)

Such standards should either be included only as a capstone standard in a particular grade, or should be scaffolded from grade to grade to demonstrate a clear progression of rigor.

Finally, the organization of the reading standards is hard to follow. They are organized into four categories: “Key Ideas and Details,” “Craft and Structure,” “Integration of Knowledge and Ideas,” and “Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity.” This framework creates a false sense of separation between inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in a literary text (treated under “Key Ideas”) and point of view (treated under “Craft and Structure”). Since many kinds of texts, genres, sub-genres, and their characteristics are discussed in each category, it is also difficult to determine whether a logical sequence covering all of this important content has been achieved. What’s more, because the standards often offer a choice of genres to teachers, as in “Analyze how particular elements of a story *or* drama interact,” (emphasis added) coverage of essential genre-specific content is even harder to track.

### Clarity and Specificity Conclusion

Where clarity and specificity are concerned, the standards are an improvement on the March draft. In some strands, they illustrate more clearly the growth expected across grades. Still, the organization of the reading strand, as well as the instances of vague and unmeasurable language, mean that the standards do not ultimately provide sufficient clarity and detail to guide teachers and curriculum and assessment developers effectively. They therefore earn two points out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

## **Content and Rigor**

### Reading

As noted in Fordham’s review of the March draft, the standards lay a clear foundation for reading acquisition in the early grades by outlining straightforward expectations in phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. It should be noted, however, that the useful examples included in the March draft (about the progression of specific phonological awareness skills, for example) have been moved to the standards’ Appendix A, making it somewhat less likely that teachers will use these critical examples as a guide for instruction.

The standards for vocabulary development are mostly thorough; they consistently address word analysis and etymology. They maintain, however, that students should choose “flexibly from a range of strategies” to “determine or clarify the meaning of unknown words...,” suggesting that the strategies mentioned (the use of context clues, word analysis, and consulting a dictionary) are all equally useful. In grades 6-12, students “verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase by checking the inferred meaning in context *or* in a dictionary” (emphasis added). This statement appears tautological, since an inferred meaning and a preliminary determination would likely be the same thing. The dictionary is the place for verification.

To illustrate the quality and complexity of what students should read, the standards include lists of “exemplar” texts for grade spans K-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-12. These lists include some welcome additions to the March draft, particularly in high school, such as Voltaire, Kafka, and Sophocles at grades 9-10, and Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville in grades 11-12. The lists now represent a range of solid literature and informational texts, as well as titles for “history/social studies” and “science, mathematics, and technical subjects.”

The exemplar text lists also include “sample performance tasks,” designed to “illustrate specifically the application of the standards to texts of sufficient complexity, quality, and range.” For example, this task is listed following the informational text exemplars for grades 2 and 3:

Students explain how the main idea that Lincoln had “many faces” in Russell Freedman’s *Lincoln: A Photobiography* is supported by key details in the text (grades 2-3)

The task cites the standard to which it is tied. These simple examples throughout the appendix are minimalistic but helpful additions for teachers.

Common standards for U.S. students should emphasize the importance of reading grade-appropriate works of outstanding American literature that reflect our common heritage. The standards now include one clear and rigorous standard that prioritizes this essential content:

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics (grade 11)

In addition, the “informational text” strands include the analysis of essential American documents:

Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and topics (grades 9-10)

Although it would be ideal to find standards focused on American literature in all grades, these high school standards are welcome additions. In most cases, they cite essential texts specifically and leave little doubt in teachers’ minds about what knowledge and skills students need to master.

In other places, however, the reading standards for both literature and informational text fail to address the specific text types, genres, and sub-genres in a systematic intersection with the skills they target. As written, the standards often address skills as they might apply to a number of genres and sub-genres. As a result, some essential content goes missing.

For example, CCR reading standard number one states:

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text (reading, CCR 1)

The grade-specific articulation of these CCRs are intended to illustrate how the standard should be applied when dealing with different text types, such as literary and informational, yet in many places they fail to do so. Take, for example, the following standards addressing literary texts for grades 3-5:

Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers (grade 3)

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text (grade 4)

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text (grade 5)

The related standards for grades 6-12 continue in this vein, exhibiting only minor distinctions across the grades, such as citing evidence “to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text.”

Several problems surface here. First, these standards don’t properly scaffold skills from grade to grade. For example, quoting from text is arguably easier than paraphrasing, but the standards require mastery of paraphrasing first.

Second, these standards are also repeated verbatim in the informational text strand, thus making no distinction between applying this skill to literary and informational text. To illustrate how the standards apply to different text types, and to determine the true rigor of these standards, they should be more explicitly linked to specific genres and sub-genres in each category.

What’s more, while some genres are mentioned occasionally in the standards, others, such as speeches, essays, and many forms of poetry, are rarely if ever mentioned by name. Similarly, many sub-genres, such as satires or epic poems, are never addressed. While the appended list of exemplar texts can be helpful in shaping teachers’ choices about texts, the standards themselves should provide specific guidance about the genres and sub-genres to be prioritized at each grade level to ensure that students are exposed to a wide range of literary and non-literary texts across the grades. Without such guidance, students could easily end up reading novels almost exclusively, year after year.

Many defining characteristics of the various genres are also rarely, if ever, mentioned. For example, the standards don’t specifically address the use of alliteration and extended metaphors in speeches, or internal rhyme in poetry.

Where literary elements *are* mentioned, their treatment is spotty. CCR reading standard number three, for example, is a wide-ranging statement: “Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.” The grade-specific standards for literature in this category deal largely with the literary elements of plot, setting, and characterization, but not in a systematic progression across grades. Students are never asked, for example, to define plot, nor to identify the elements of a plot so that they would be capable of doing what the standards ultimately demand of them in the upper grades, such as this broadly worded—and ambitious—standard for grades 11-12:

Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama...(grades 11-12)

This seems like a fine skill for students to acquire and practice, but on closer examination, we can’t be sure which elements of the story *or* drama students should know and analyze: Symbolism? Characterization? Stage directions? How are teachers to ensure that sufficient attention is given to all literary elements over the course of twelve years if these are not specified and if no systematic treatment is afforded them?

The treatment of informational text is similarly problematic in places. Although the standards do a decent job of asking students to trace the reasoning in arguments, the types of reasoning, such as inductive and deductive (including the reli-

ability of each), are not named. Logical fallacies, such as *ad hominem* attacks and appeals to pity, are also never named, meaning that students will have no common language for wrestling with the skills that the standards ask them to master later, such as “identifying false statements and fallacious reasoning” in grades 9-10.

### Writing

The Common Core Writing standards are somewhat repetitive, but they do include much essential content, especially by cross-referencing the Language standards for grammar, usage, and mechanics throughout. The rigor of the Writing standards is illuminated by student work samples that help teachers understand the kind of writing that is expected of students across the grades for the three genres they include: “arguments,” “informative/explanatory texts,” and “narratives.” The writing samples are also annotated to help clarify the general expectations laid out in the grade-specific standards.

On the other hand, the Writing standards include too many expectations that begin with the phrase, “With guidance and support from adults....” For example, in grade 2:

With guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing (grade 2)

Such standards are problematic because they fail to adequately scaffold or clearly delineate what *students* should be able to do. There are certainly revision and editing skills that students can master independently in second grade. For example, they could revise for word choice, or for capitalization and end marks. Unfortunately, by merely stating that students should revise and edit “with guidance and support,” teachers themselves are left with very little guidance about what grade-appropriate skills they should be working to ensure students master.

One troublesome aspect of the writing standards is the persistently blurry line between an “argument” and an “informative/explanatory essay.” Appended material seeks to clarify the distinction, and summarizes by saying that “arguments are used for persuasion and explanations for clarification.” Yet not all explanations clarify (“because I said so!”) and not all arguments must be persuasive. An argument merely introduces, develops, and establishes a claim by providing evidence to support the claim, as in a literary analysis. Here, however, a literary analysis is not an argument; it is categorized as an informative/explanatory essay, which is arguably another category altogether. Still, if arguments here are all persuasive, then they should include the essential characteristics of persuasive writing in their description, such as a recommendation or call to action—and the category should in fact be called “persuasion.” As they are, these new definitions are likely to confuse teachers, curriculum developers, and publishers.

### Listening and Speaking

The Common Core standards for Speaking and Listening have improved since the March draft, in which standards for discussion versus group work were not clearly delineated. Now the standards for “Comprehension and Collaboration” more clearly address both seminar-style and other kinds of classroom discussions (including those that are teacher-led), in addition to standards for collaborating to accomplish a task.

The standards for “Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas” include expectations for making oral presentations but are vague regarding the specific products required of students, citing “a range of formal and informal tasks,” even in grades 11-12. It would be more helpful to teachers if specific student outcomes were described.

### Oral and Written Language Conventions

Oral and written language conventions are systematically addressed in the Language strand. Conventions are addressed in grade-by-grade expectations with acknowledgment of the fact that some will need to be addressed repeatedly across grades, such as subject-verb and pronoun-antecedent agreement. In most ways, these standards reflect a marked improvement over the March draft by specifying more grammar content in a more logical progression across grades.

### Research and Media

Research and media are both addressed, though more could be done in both areas, given the emphasis they receive nowadays from employers and postsecondary faculty. The research expectations are embedded in the Writing section and, on the plus side, many key elements of the research process are discussed, as in this standard:

Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation (grades 9-10)

The standards assert in introductory material that “research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the standards,” yet the embedding of the media standards does not appear to be systematic. They are sporadic in their rigor. For example, a rather vague grade 6 standard says:

Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study (grade 6)

In that same strand, however, a more rigorous standard appears at grade 8:

Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation (grade 8)

Greater consistency (and perhaps a separate media strand) would have improved these standards.

### *Content and Rigor Conclusion*

The final Common Core standards represent an improvement over the March draft, although some problems remain to be set right in later editions. Most are relatively minor, but the overwhelming focus on skills over content in reading combined with the confusion about the writing standards, the lack of detail about oral presentations, and the sporadic rigor of the media standards leaves as much as 15 percent of the essential content missing, thus earning the Common Core standards six points out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

### **The Bottom Line**

Despite their imperfections, the Common Core ELA standards are far superior to those now in place in many states, districts, and classrooms. They are ambitious and challenging for students and educators alike. Accompanied by a properly aligned, content-rich curriculum, they provide K-12 teachers with a sturdy instructional framework for this most fundamental of subjects.

1 *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), p. 3. [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf).

2 See Sheila Byrd Carmichael, Gabrielle Martino, and W. Stephen Wilson, *Review of the Draft K-12 Common Core Standards* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010), [http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/20100323\\_CommonCoreReview.pdf](http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/20100323_CommonCoreReview.pdf).