

Bringing the Common Core Standards to Life in the Classroom

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an initiative coordinated by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), was initiated in June 2009 and released to the public in June 2010.

What was the impetus for the Standards?

- *Currently, every state has its own set of academic standards, meaning public educated students are learning different content at different rates.*
- *All students must be **prepared to compete** with not only their American peers in the next state, but with students around the world.*

Various constituencies were brought together: teachers, parents, administrators, colleges and universities. The aim was to make the Standards comparable to high-performing countries and the best existing state standards. The Standards created are not mandated, however, forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted them, ultimately leading the US toward a common set of academic expectations.

What are the Common Core Standards?

Common Core Standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs.”

(NGA & CCSSO, 2010) <http://www.corestandards.org>

What are the ELA Standards?

The 10 ELA Reading Standards describe what it means to be literate. The Standards are organized by grade level: K-5, 6-8, 9-10, 11-College and Career Ready. The CCSS take the 10 anchor standards in reading spiral them up a staircase of sophistication over time.

Key Ideas and Details

1. 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.

2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.¹
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

The ELA Writing Standards, likewise, are divided by grade level into 4 broad categories:

Text Types and Purposes
Production and Distribution of Writing
Research to Build and Present Knowledge
Range of Writing

Appendices, although sometimes ignored, are an important part of the CCSS document. Because it provides background information about the development of the standards and highlights the approach to text complexity, Appendix A should be one of the first things read. Appendix B provides text exemplars at varying levels of complexity from a variety of genres; in addition, there are sample performance tasks. Appendix C contains annotated writing samples that demonstrate the writing standards.

As teachers, schools and districts read and study the standards, it's important to remember that they are merely broad statements of academic goals. It is the curriculum that is taught day-to-day and week-to-week.

Expectations are high for the CCSS and results will depend on the quality of classroom implementation. Therefore, the goal of this white paper is to help teachers and administrators transition to the CCSS by considering some of the key instructional impacts, such as focus on informational text, deep integration of reading and writing, conscientious approach to vocabulary development, text-dependent questions and use of

progressively more complex text. The following suggestions can help individual teachers get started in the classroom while thornier issues are being worked out at the district level.

Close reading of text

What is it?

“...the close reading model is a central guiding principle of the standards and as a result will be a central focus of the PARCC Assessment System. ... Close reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically. It emphasizes using texts of grade-level-appropriate complexity and focusing student reading on the particular words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the author, encouraging students to read and re-read deliberately.”

A central focus of the ELA Common Core State Standards is close reading of complex text and because of that will be a part of any assessment system that is being developed. Close reading involves engaging with and examining facts and details about the text. The purpose is to notice features and language used. The next step in close reading is to think thoroughly and methodically about what the details mean.

What does it mean for teachers?

With fluency’s definition often narrowed to mean reading quickly we are developing readers who read too fast without understanding what they’ve read. Reading has turned into a race with a “stopwatch” mentality. What this tells students is that to read fast is to be a good reader.

Now we have to teach students to slow down and also be text detectives, to be more attentive to the text, to read and reread deliberately. We have to focus student attention on certain words and/or particular phrases or sentences the author uses.

Teachers can start by using a number of grade-level-appropriate short pieces of text of sufficient complexity for close reading. These texts need to be rich enough that students are able to draw good evidence from them. Students need to present their thinking, observations and analyses through writing or technology or speaking.

How might teachers implement the standard?

The first step is to know why you are having students read something. What do you want students to know or understand about the reading when they get done? As teachers, we need to provide our students with a focus or purpose for reading. By the time my students finish *Earthquakes, Volcanoes, and Tsunamis*, I want them to know the forces that cause them. I want them to understand what scientists do to predict them and keep people safe.

That's the cognitive preparation I need to do before I assign text, and that will help promote close reading. When using informational text, the strategy of G.I.S.T. (Generating Interactions Between Schemata and Text) is helpful graphic organizer to promote close reading. GIST asks students to identify the 5W's and H (Who, What, When Where, Why and How) and then compose a 20 word "gist of what they've read. More information can be found at www.readwritethink.org. This is a great strategy to use with English Language Learners, too.

For literary text, using a strategy called "Someone Wanted But So," is a handy word phrase to direct student thinking. In the story *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, the "someone" is the three billy goats. The "wanted" is to get over the bridge, "but" the troll wouldn't let them, "so" the biggest billy goat butted him into the river. Students can make a foldable as a graphic organizer to pull out these facts before writing a summary statement.

The G.I.S.T. and "Somebody Wanted But So" strategies utilizing graphic organizers that help the reader with interactions between schema and text. Schema can be defined as a structured way to help us organize our knowledge about something and then help us process that knowledge.

For example, a young child may develop a schema for a horse. She knows that a horse is large, has hair, four legs and a tail. When the little girl encounters a cow for the first time, she might initially call it a horse. After all it fits in with her schema for the characteristics of a horse; it is a large animal that has hair, four legs and a tail. One she is told that this is a different animal called a cow, she will modify her existing schema for a horse and create a new schema for a cow.

Now, let's imagine that this very young girl encounters a miniature horse for the first time and mistakenly identifies it as a dog. Her parents explain to her that the animal is actually a very small type of horse, so the little girl must this time modify her existing schema for horses. She now realizes that while some horses are very large animals others can be very small. Through her new experience, her existing schemas are modified and new information is learned.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

Reading A-Z and Raz-Kids offer developmentally appropriate texts for students to practice and apply the skills and strategies necessary for close reading. The fact that books can be projected allows teachers to model close reading before setting students loose to practice it. Reading a-z has a collection of graphic organizers to use for close reading practice and, in fact, there is a great graphic organizer to use with G.I.S.T. It has the 5 W's, but it also has a space for students to think about the facts and details they've gathered and write a summary. This is an important next step if using graphic organizers in the classroom. Search for "Summary Chart" to locate this teaching aid.

If students have relied on skimming and scanning to answer questions, they will need lots of teaching and reteaching. Teachers can find lessons plans for the books where they will find additional ideas and resources.

Text dependent questions

What is it?

An important ELA Common Core Standard focuses on students' ability to ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for their answers. Eighty to 90 percent of the reading standards in each grade require text dependent analysis.

The relevant reading standard requires students to “reading closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it. They must also cite pertinent textual evidence when writing/speaking to support conclusions drawn from text. They no longer can rely solely on prior knowledge or personal experience.

In the nationally developed “Publishers’ Criteria” publishers are being asked to use

...text-dependent questions [that] can only be answered by careful scrutiny of the text...and do not require information or evidence from outside the text or texts.

Coleman & Pimentel, p. 5

What does it mean for teachers?

Questions that are text dependent require close reading of text. Students have to demonstrate the ability to use what the text says and provide pertinent text-based evidence to make inferences rather than just relying on their prior knowledge or personal experience. Although using prior knowledge and personal experiences can demonstrate students' ability to synthesize across sources, it is equally important that students be able to answer question by referring explicitly back to the text they are using.

How might a teacher implement the standard?

This doesn't mean that 80-90% of the questions should be literal level questions. Nor does it mean that a response using a personal connection be abandoned. Too often, however, students are allowed to make personal connections that don't require familiarity with the text. Or they get open-ended questions that do not require evidence from the text or require them to provide careful analyses or build arguments from text-based evidence.

A good instructional strategy to use that addresses teaching close reading and using text-dependent questions is *Question-Answer Relationship*. Taffy Raphael (1984) writes about there being 4 types of questions: *Right There, Think & Search, Author & Me, On My*

Own. The *Right There* and *Think and Search* questions would be considered text dependent because the answer is “In the Book.” *Author and Me* requires more complex reasoning where students need to summarize and predict based on multiple sources in the text and support their positions using prior knowledge and text references. *On My Own* questions are considered “In My Head” and do not require the text at hand. As teachers we can use *On My Own* questions before students read a selection. We can have students do a quick write or have them discuss a question prior to reading, thus preparing them to read.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

Using the book *Our Solar System* (Level S) as part of a science unit on space, a teacher could ask a simple recall/right there questions as follows:

What are two reasons we cannot live without the sun?

In the past, teachers have used another popular questioning technique and have asked open-ended questions such as

Why is Earth a special planet? Or,

What planet would you like to live on?

Neither of these two questions requires students to do close reading of the text. Many students could answer the question by only using prior knowledge meaning their answers do not demonstrate that they read the text in question.

A text-dependent question could be

Could people live on Earth if there were no Sun? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. Or,

Explain why conditions on a distant planet like Neptune are so different than those on Earth.

I would always include at the end of my text dependent question, “Use evidence from the text to support your answer.” Then I would have to model and have students practice until it naturally becomes part of their routine. That may take time!

The discussion cards that are part of Reading A-Z lesson plans are great resources for text dependent questions. Each question card is tagged with the specific reading skill it targets including skills such as compare and contrast, cause and effect, inference, and analyze and evaluate.

Text Complexity

“The Common Core Standards hinge on students encountering appropriately complex texts at each grade level in order to develop the mature language skills and the conceptual knowledge they need for success in school and life” (p. 3)

The ability to successfully read, understand, and respond to complex text is central to achieving Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and yet, in almost every classroom, teachers confront the challenge of students who cannot read grade-level text on their own. For decades, we have responded to this challenge by giving struggling readers easier texts. Even when these students make reasonable gains, many never progress to reading grade-level texts, and as a result, never have the opportunity to read and learn from the complex texts demanded by CCSS. If we are to support achievement of CCSS by every student, we will need to become skilled at differentiating instruction, so that every student in our classroom has access to texts with challenging language and vocabulary.

What is it?

The CCSS define text complexity using a three part model for determining how easy or difficult a text might be. The three parts include the following:

Qualitative measures - factors include levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality, and knowledge demands.

Quantitative measures – readability and other scores of text complexity such as word and sentence length and text cohesion

Reader and Task considerations – variable specific to the individual reader such as background knowledge, motivation, interests and experiences

Standard 10 of the CCSS includes the range of text types that students are expected to read. It also provides sample texts that illustrate the complexity, quality and range of K-5 literary and informational text.

What does it mean for teachers?

Text complexity which is addressed in Standard 10 defines a grade-by-grade “staircase” of increasing text complexity starting with kindergarten and extending to the college and career readiness level. Whatever they are reading, students must also show a growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of text, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts.

The *Quantitative Text Complexity Standards* recommend that multiple quantitative measures be used whenever possible. Quantitative measures can serve as a starting point for discussion, but teachers need to use professional judgment rather than relying solely on a quantitative score. It is especially difficult to measure K-1 texts, poetry, and drama with quantitative accuracy. Teachers can use Appendix A in the standards for a preliminary list of qualitative measures.

If we are to support achievement of CCSS by every student we will need to differentiate instruction so that every student in our classroom can access challenging language and vocabulary of more complex text, and we will need to employ instructional strategies that make difficult text easier for students to read and understand.

How might a teacher implement the standard?

Typically, struggling readers are given easier, less complex texts to read. We tend to address individual needs by changing the text rather than by changing instruction.

To adjust instruction teachers can provide scaffolding to assist students with complex texts. Scaffolding is temporary guidance or assistance, and scaffolding is how students can learn to handle more complex text. Scaffolding can be provided by a partially filled in graphic organizer or cued retelling protocol. It can also be working with an adult or a more capable peer, enabling the student to perform a task he or she otherwise would not be able to do alone. Ultimately, the goal is for the student to complete the work on her own, so the scaffolding needs to be removed as quickly as possible. Scaffold complexity; don't avoid it.

We also need to up-level our students as quickly as possible. Because of time constraints and high student loads, students can languish at their instructional or less complex level until a teacher has had a chance to assess them to see if they can handle a higher level of text rather than the support they need to read texts at the appropriate level of complexity.

APPENDIX A of the standards (especially the chart on pp. 13 and 14) explains the notion of how text complexity is measured across the grade bands.

APPENDIX B includes exemplar texts (stories and literature, poetry, and informational texts) that illustrate appropriate level of complexity by grade.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

The multi-leveled texts on the Learning A-Z bookshelves provide scaffolding that will enable to students to tackle more complex text. This allows all students to participate in content discussions around the same essential question

Raz-Kids is a motivational program that allows students to up-level themselves when the program deems them ready. The teacher assigns students to an appropriate “library” of books. When students show competence with understanding the content of that level, they don't have to wait for the teacher to do a running record to up-level them; the program can move them to the next level of books. This helps students move to higher level and more complex texts when they are ready, not when the teacher is ready.

The Raz-Kids website also provides students and teachers with a time-efficient way to monitor student reading progress through a benchmark assessment tool. This tool helps

teachers to evaluate students' recorded reading and adjust reading levels to ensure that students do not languish too long at a level without appropriate challenge.

Teach Academic and “Rich” Vocabulary

What is it?

Vocabulary's link to comprehension has been firmly established. Unfortunately, the teaching of vocabulary has not been frequent and systematic in schools. In the CCSS vocabulary is part of the Language Standards. The standards dealing with vocabulary focus on “understanding words and phrases, their relationships, and their nuances and on acquiring new vocabulary, particularly general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.”
(CCSS ELA K-5, p.28-29)

What does it mean for teachers?

With the introduction of Reading First, vocabulary garnered more visibility. Teachers started hearing about the “three tiers of words.” The work of Isabel Beck and Robert Marzano started to change the way vocabulary was taught.

Beck's vocabulary work forms the conceptual framework for how CCSS treats vocabulary. The three tiers are as follows:

Tier 1: *General Vocabulary* learned through spoken language. These are basic words or everyday language that need little instruction in meaning, i.e. boy, sit, table, walk, run. Some students, including English language learners, will also need support in mastering these high-frequency words. These words are important, but not the focus.

Tier 2: *Unfamiliar vocabulary* found in written text. The CCSS refers to these as “general academic words”. Sometimes they are referred to as “rich vocabulary.” These words are more precise or subtle forms of familiar words. Instead of “scary”, “sinister” could be used. These words are found across a variety of domains.

Tier 3: *Academic vocabulary* – CCSS refers to these words as “domain specific;” they are critical to understanding the concepts of the content taught in schools. Generally, they have low frequency use and are limited to specific knowledge domains, e.g. isotope, lathe, peninsula, refinery. Best learned when teaching specific content lessons as they tend to be more common in informational text.

How might teachers implement the standard?

The best advice is to not make students look up words in a dictionary or a glossary and write out the definition. They often pick the first option, and it usually isn't the right one.

Instead effective direct vocabulary instruction entails

- Descriptions as opposed to definitions
- Use of linguistic and nonlinguistic representations
- Gradual shaping of word meanings through multiple exposure
- Teaching and using word parts
- Different types of words require different types of instruction
- Students interacting about the words they are learning
- Use of games
- Focus on terms important to academic subjects

Marzano, 2004

Teachers can also use the 6 steps that Robert Marzano recommends in his book *Building Background Knowledge* (2004). These steps work especially well with Tier 3 words.

The first 3 steps introduce and develop vocabulary:

- Step 1: Provide a description, explanation or example of new term.
- Step 2: Students restate explanation of new term in own words.
- Step 3: Students create a nonlinguistic representation of term.

The next 3 steps shape and sharpen the student's understanding of the term:

- Step 4: Students periodically do activities that help add to knowledge of the vocabulary terms.
- Step 5: Periodically students are asked to discuss terms with one another.
- Step 6: Periodically students are involved in games that allow them to play with terms.

In *Bringing Words to Life* Beck (2002) has guidelines that help teachers determine which Tier 2 words to teach:

- Is this generally a useful word?
- Does the word relate to other words /ideas that students know or have been learning?
- Is the word useful in helping students understand text?

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

In the lesson plans provided for the books in Reading A-Z, teachers can find recommended vocabulary words and activities to practice using the words. Teachers can

select which words they think are the best for the group of students they are teaching. Each

Reading a-z book comes with a premade vocabulary lesson with several activities that promote multiple exposures to each word taught. The vocabulary lesson resources are available through the Vocabulary a-z website.

Vocabulary A-Z is an excellent resource for customized word lessons offering teachers the opportunity to create and save their own word lists.

Combining Standards

What is it?

While this recommendation is not found in the CCSS document, it is one that makes sense for the classroom teacher. Using the standards together makes for richer instructional lessons. As teachers become more familiar with the standards they will note how all four ELA strands are interwoven. The foundational skills are important ones to consider when combining standards as students should apply their knowledge of phonics and word analysis to be able to recognize the words they encounter and should be able to read with accuracy and fluency to be able to comprehend texts sufficiently. The writing standards directly connect to specific reading standards and help teachers determine whether students understand what they read.

What does it mean for teachers?

Instruction cannot be compartmentalized, i.e., first I teach reading and then I teach language and then writing. With the specific reading demands placed on students by the CCSS, teachers need to focus on vocabulary, the use of language and the structural organization of the text. More integration of lessons will have to occur. The assessment systems being developed will ask students to respond to what they have read through writing or speaking. It is not “teaching to the test” to model lessons on what students are likely to see on the assessment. It is smart, and this integration is best practice.

Several organizations are developing instructional modules which capture the integrated nature of the standards. Some modules may have an informational reading focus combined with an expository writing focus. The reading and writing activities will rest on a base of other skills including, but not limited to, analyzing content, citing evidence, using appropriate academic vocabulary and reporting findings.

How might a teacher implement the standard?

When reading pieces of text students can learn and practice phonics and word analysis skills, so they are reliably able to make sense of multisyllabic words in books (RF.3.3). During small group instruction time when students are silently reading a section of text, the teacher can also assess how students are progressing on their reading fluency by

asking them to read aloud quietly while she listens and takes note of whether the student is reading fluently and with expression and appropriate phrasing.

Elementary teachers teaching science and social studies and content-area teachers in the upper grades need to emphasize reading, vocabulary and writing in their planning and instruction for teaching the content. Students learn through reading domain-specific texts in social studies and science by writing informative/explanatory and argumentative pieces utilizing the vocabulary they have been learning.

For example, if a teacher were to use the Reading a-z book *Rattlers* (Level R) during an ELA or science class, the following standards could be combined for a complete lesson:

Reading informational text:

RI.3.1.: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

RI.3.2.: Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.

RI.3.4.: Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a *grade 3 topic or subject area*.

RI.3.10.: By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the grades 2–3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Reading Foundational skills:

RF.3.3.: Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

RF.3.3(a): Identify and know the meaning of the most common prefixes and derivational suffixes.

RF.3.3(b): Decode words with common Latin suffixes.

RF.3.4.: Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.

RF.3.4(a): Read on-level text with purpose and understanding.

Language standards:

L.3.1.: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

L.3.1(a): Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences.

L.3.2.: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

L.3.2(e): Use conventional spelling for high-frequency and other studied words and for adding suffixes to base words (e.g., *sitting, smiled, cries, happiness*).

L.3.6.: Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate conversational, general academic, and domain specific words and phrases, including those that signal spatial and temporal relationships (e.g., *After dinner that night we went looking for them*).

Without including any writing or speaking standards, the teacher can instruct and students have the opportunity to work with 14 different standards. This should not be an unusual occurrence for lessons. Familiarity with the standards allows for ease in seeing which standards can be combined for any lesson.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

Learning a-z has a Common Core Standards “landing page” where teachers can get answers to frequently asked questions surrounding the core. Also on that page, teachers can find many resources. Teachers can learn how printable, projectable, online and interactive resources can help in the implementation of the CCSS. Also, there will be helpful videos by editors of the three key content areas that Learning A-Z offers: reading, writing and science. In addition there is information about texts and samples of how standards can be combined using those texts.

In the material found in CCSS under Search/Correlations on the Home Page, use “Books by Skills,” found under the “All Books Tab,” to differentiate instruction by looking for books that target the same skills, but at a lower or higher reading level. Using these materials you can start building or add to your existing resources.

Informational Text

What is it?

We in America in K-5 focus 80% of our time on stories...that is what is tested on exams and in our textbooks...yet in K-5, the general knowledge you develop plays a crucial role in your performance in other disciplines and your ability to read more complex texts. So the CCSS demand that 50% of the texts students read in K-5 is informational, primarily about science and history, the arts...the texts through which students learn about the world.

David Coleman, CCSS

Furthermore

- By sixth grade, 80% of school reading tasks are expository (Venezky, 2007)
- 80% of adult/workplace reading is informational
- Standardized tests are 85% expository (Daniels, 2007)
- Students’ success or failure in school is closely tied to their ability to comprehend expository text” (Kamil, 2003).

The CCSS addresses informational text in the following categories

- Literary Nonfiction – uses factual information within a story-like format
- Exposition – factual, textbook-like reading
- Argument/Persuasion – texts that use argument to present a position and convince reader
- Procedural – step by step instructions; how-to-do something

What does it mean for teachers?

The following framework should guide teachers as to the amount of literary versus informational text:

<i>Grade Span</i>	<i>Literary</i>	<i>Informational</i>
K-4	50%	50%
5-8	45%	55%
9-12	30%	70%

CCSS Introduction, p. 5

Increasing the amount of informational text students read K-12 will prepare them to read college and career-ready texts. Teachers particularly need to focus on texts that use informational text structures rather than literary non-fiction that are structured as stories such as biographies and memoirs. All texts chosen must be worthy of close reading.

This emphasis on informational books means that teachers need to locate more informational text around topics/themes that are part of the curriculum. It’s not enough to just read informational text once in a while.

Ideally, the reading of the different types of informational text can be taught during ELA time. However, it is helpful if the same or similar texts can be read during science and social studies.

Teaching the different types of informational text and organizational patterns is a crucial skill. Using text frames and graphic organizers to scaffold instruction in the reading or more complex text is a strategy.

Grade	To Persuade	To Explain	To Convey Experience
4	30%	35%	35%
8	35%	35%	30%
12	40%	40%	20%

CCSS, Introduction, p.5

One thing is very important. We cannot let students just fill out a graphic organizer or text frame. Those are simply tools to organize our thinking. Students need to write a summary or do a compare-contrast paper to show they understand what they've read.

How might teachers implement the standard? Finding good informational text has become easier over the years as basal programs have added to their literary selections. However, teachers still have to search for a particular type of informational text. Given our time constraints, it is helpful to have resources at hand that we can use when we want to use them, not just use them when they appear in a textbook or reading series.

We need to move beyond just teaching text features and one genre of informational text. Too often biographies are used to teach informational text to the exclusion of other types. We need to use procedural or how-to texts and persuasive or pro/con texts, too. The more organizational formats students are exposed to, the easier it is for them to do close reading of any text.

Using tiered texts of increased complexity allows all students to participate in content instruction at the same time as they are supported at their reading level. It also allows students to move up to texts of increasing ability because they now have the content background and understanding of how the text is organized.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

Learning A-Z is an immense resource for informational text. A teacher can find multi-level texts on a topic, such as *Earthquakes, Volcanoes, and Tsunamis*. That book is available at levels Q, T and W. All students can investigate the same essential question and learn the same academic vocabulary, but have the content presented at varying levels.

A search of Reading A-Z books came up with 16 different *procedural* texts at different reading levels. This type of text is usually not easy to find, so having multiple books at different levels allows teachers to do text characteristic charts where students dig below the content to examine text structure and to see how the author put the book together.

Learning A-Z has many graphic organizers that can be used to help students organize their thinking about around the content of informational text. Often the graphic organizers provide space for students to synthesize the information into a summary or a more extensive piece of expository writing.

The resources in ScienceA-Z aren't just for the science classroom. Teachers can teach a literacy skill or strategy and then use the same book or group of books to teach a science concept.

Using shorter text

What is it?

Beginning with Reading Standard 1, CCSS place a high priority on close, sustained reading of complex text. Close reading focuses on what is actually within the text. Shorter, challenging texts that elicit close reading and re-reading need to be used at each grade level. Teaching close reading requires compact, short texts that students can read and re-read deliberately and slowly to examine and think about the meanings of individual words, the order of the sentences and the development of ideas. Reading in this manner allows students to fully understand informational texts as well as analyze works of literature effectively.

What does it mean to me?

The study of short texts is particularly useful to enable students at a wide range of reading levels to participate in the close analysis of more demanding text. Rather than focusing on a text as a whole, it is easier for teachers to teach a comprehension skill or strategy when using a shorter passage. When students don't have to worry about comprehending a longer text, they can focus on certain words, organizational structure and nuances of meaning. Close reading using shorter text helps students to deepen their understanding and move beyond surface reading. It is imperative that the short text chosen has depth and some complexity to it. Teachers will have to consider text carefully.

How might a teacher implement the standard?

Start a collection of interesting articles, poems or other short pieces. Using projected text is a great advantage as we model for students our ongoing thinking as we respond to a short piece of text.

Provide students with copies of a short text. Read it together while asking students to write their thinking in the margins or highlight words or phrases. Have students share their thinking with a partner. One of the best ways to enhance understanding is to talk about text after reading.

Give lots of opportunities for close reading of short texts at or beyond the grade level. Students need access to lots of accessible texts and time to choose and read them. Increasing number of pages is essential to increasing reading ability. Challenge students to make claims and support with evidence from the text. Starting with shorter text facilitates the learning process.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

Reading a-z has many books that are short and complex enough to use for teaching close reading. Being able to project these books allows the teacher to model and students to

have guided practice. The multi-level books allow students to learn the same content at three different levels, so all students respond to the same topic as they record their thinking and discuss with a partner.

Expanding Writing

What is it?

The CCSS asks students develop the ability to write effectively and proficiently. Studies show that learning to present important information in an organized piece of writing helps students generate a greater understanding of a text and improves both their reading comprehension and their writing skills (CCSS, Appendix C, see student samples).

Teachers need to balance the genres of writing. A lot of teachers have the students do fictional or personal narrative writing. A good rule of thumb might be 30% informational (to explain/inform), 30% persuasive/argumentative (which can include pro/con) and 30% narrative. There should be a mix of on-demand writing about text and more extensive pieces where a student has a chance to reread, review and revise. Wherever possible, technology needs to be part of the instruction whether it is for the writing itself, or to access multiple sources of information.

What does it mean for teachers?

According to the Standards document writing instruction needs to emphasize the use of evidence to inform or to make arguments. Students need to develop skills by using written arguments that respond to the ideas, events, facts, and arguments presented in the texts they listen to and read. Students also have to be able to write informational or explanatory text. By using of social studies and science texts teachers can show excellent models of how to connect and sequence ideas when writing to explain or persuade.

Along with shorter pieces, writing instruction also needs to include short, focused research projects in order to develop college and career-ready skills. This includes more formal, structured analytic writing that either advances an argument or explains an idea.

How might teachers implement the standard?

When planning lessons, teachers should look for ways that reading and writing incorporate the skills of citing evidence from text, analyzing the content, using correct English conventions, learning and using academic and rich vocabulary, conducting discussions and reporting findings orally.

Writing can also be used in a more routine fashion for the building of knowledge about a topic or reflection on a text. It can take the form of notes, summaries, learning logs,

writing to learn, or even a response to a short text selection or an open-ended question. Written responses to text-dependent questions also allow students to expand their use of rich and academic vocabulary while developing proficiency in content analysis.

For example, in grade 4 of the writing standards (W.4.1), students are to be able to write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information. Deconstructing that standard it says students must be able to do the following:

- Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which related ideas are grouped to support the writer's purpose.
- Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.
- Link opinion and reasons using words and phrases
- Provide a concluding statement or section related to the opinion presented

By reading the subset of the standard, teachers can pull out the writing lessons that need to be taught, practiced and assessed.

How can Learning A-Z resources be used?

The Writing a-z website offers process writing lessons for multiple genres and text types along with associated student resource templates for the lesson. The website provides hundreds of additional aids for teaching writing and a writer's response task for selected Reading a-z books at levels E through Z.

The Reading a-z books offer excellent models of how to connect and sequence ideas when writing to explain or persuade. For example using the book *To Drill or Not to Drill?* students would have a model for pro/con writing. This book gives readers information on both sides of a heated debate: whether or not to drill for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). The book includes a history of American oil along with reasons to drill in ANWR, reasons not to drill, and the science and law behind it all. Photographs, maps, and graphs support the text.

For younger children writing models exist also. *How to Make Ice Cream* provides students with a model for a how-to book. Students can also follow the list of ingredients and the five easy steps, and soon they will be eating their own homemade ice cream.

Conclusion

In the first few years of CCSS implementation, everyone - teachers, schools and districts - will work through the problems and issues that are inherent when we are faced with a new initiative.

In the beginning, teachers will not be able to build on previous grade levels standards because the students will not have been introduced to them fully or at all. We will be faced with filling in blank spots in their understanding.

As the CCSS document is studied it will be apparent that there are no mandated assessments included. Two projects (SMART and PARC), made up of a consortia of states, have undertaken that responsibility through grants from the federal government. These assessments won't be available until 2015.

We have the opportunity now, as educators, to study the standards and upcoming assessments with an eye to the effect it will have on our curriculum. We, however, can start with a the few areas mentioned above to get ourselves and our students ready for a more demanding, exciting educational experience. The resources provided by Learning a-z are deep and rich and will assist on your and students' journey to academic excellence.

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