

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On English/Language Arts and the Common Core

**Editor's Note:** The Common Core State Standards are beginning to influence English/language arts instruction. This Spotlight focuses on reading and writing across the subjects, a greater emphasis on nonfiction texts, the debate over prereading, and criticisms of the standards.

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# Across the Subjects, Reading on Agenda

To meet the expectations of the common standards, Kentucky's science and social studies teachers are incorporating language arts into their classes

By Catherine Gewertz  
*Taylor Mill, Ky*

**B**eth Fahlbush is moving from desk to desk, helping her high school juniors sharpen their essays. They're zeroing in on their lead paragraphs and hunting for the evidence they must marshal to build the bodies of their essays.

"If the evidence does not directly relate to your thesis, cut it out," Ms. Fahlbush tells one girl, who listens as she twists a strand of hair in her fingers. "Remember," the teacher says to a tall boy slouched in a nearby seat, "you are writing an argumentative essay. So you need to defend each of your points."

The teenagers in Room 122 of Scott High School, here in northern Kentucky, are not in English class. They're in U.S. history. And what's happening represents a leading edge of key changes that are taking shape as states and districts put the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts into practice.

The seven middle and high schools here in Kenton County are among the first in the country to pilot a new approach to the discipline. It targets the most pivotal ideas in the standards, which demand that students become strong readers not only of fiction but of informational texts, and that they become writers able to wield research, analysis, and argumentation skills as powerful tools. Reflecting the standards themselves, the approach involves teachers of all subjects in teaching literacy skills pertinent to their disciplines.

Variations on those themes are echoing nationwide, since all but four states have adopted the standards and are now starting to grapple with how to turn them into instruction. As the first state to adopt the standards—in February 2010—Kentucky jumped into the work early.

## Shaping a Strategy

Kenton County's version is guided by a set of teaching tools that were developed by the Literacy Design Collaborative, a loosely knit group of consultants working with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has poured tens of millions in grants into supporting the common standards. More than 3,500 teachers in 50 districts in eight states, including Kentucky, are using the foundation's grants—and guidance—to try out the tools. The foundation is supporting a Mathematics Design Collaborative that is creating teaching tools for the math standards, as well. (The Gates Foundation also provides support for coverage of K-12 business and innovation in *Education Week*.)

The centerpiece of the English/language arts toolkit is a collection of "template tasks." These short, fill-in-the-blank prompts are designed to open doors to instructional tasks that demand reading, writing, and analysis, and can be customized to each teacher's subject matter. They are structured to address three types of writing—argumentation, explanatory, and narrative—and nine types of cognitive process, such as synthesis, comparison, and evaluation.

A template task that focuses on argumentation and analysis, for instance, looks like this:

"[Insert a background statement that introduces the prompt] After reading \_\_\_\_\_ (literature or informational texts), write a/an \_\_\_\_\_ (essay or substitute) that addresses

the question and support your position with evidence from the text(s)." It includes two additional levels of demand teachers can add if they choose: "Be sure to acknowledge competing views" and "Give examples from past or current events or issues to illustrate and clarify your position."

Kenton County social studies teachers used such a template to form the instructional task: "Does America still provide access to The American Dream to the 'tired, the poor, and the huddled masses?' After reading 'The Right to Fail,' the keynote address from the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and other literary and informational texts, write a synthesis essay that addresses the question and support your position with evidence from the texts."

Science teachers created their version of the instructional task by asking students to consider whether uranium use and nuclear fission are the best methods of producing energy in light of concerns about global warming. It was built into a larger instructional module for chemistry classes, aimed at building argumentation skills as students explore nuclear energy.

The prompt instructs students to read scientific sources supplied by their teacher and write a report addressing that question, supporting their positions with evidence from the texts and acknowledging competing points of view, with examples of past or current events to illustrate and clarify their positions.

The Literacy Design Collaborative has created 29 template tasks, which are available free online, along with guidelines that help teachers in scoring the resulting assignments. In the past two years, Kenton County teachers have used the templates as guides to build their own bank of 44 instructional modules in English/language arts, science, and social studies, said Gary McCormick, the district's secondary-level literacy consultant.

## A Slim Design

Kenton County officials say the templates' minimalist structure is deceptive.

"They seem much simpler than they are," said Barb Martin, who oversees the work as the 14,000-student district's assistant superintendent for academic and student support. "How you fill in those blanks is crucial and takes a lot of careful thought. Unwise choices can sink the whole thing."

"This, to me, is the doorway to getting our kids to interact with text. They really weren't. They were being read to, and given notes, and summarizing what they heard," she said.

Weaving together content, reading, and writing marks a sharp departure from common practice, in which science and social

studies teachers focus exclusively on content, Mr. McCormick said.

"We've found the structure of the [design collaborative] tools to be groundbreaking, because the content is forward at the same time as the literacy skills," he said.

Some Kenton County teachers weren't the biggest fans of the strategy when it was introduced in 2010.

Michelle Buroker, the Scott High School chemistry teacher who designed the nuclear-energy module, said that when science teachers got their first glimpse of it, they suspected it would be tough to find readings that are engaging, age-appropriate, content-rich, and full of writing-assignment potential.

"We thought we wouldn't be able to make it fit authentically into our content, that it would just make it harder for us to get through our [text]book," she said. "But now that we are finding those resources, I see that it's a good thing to have in my bag of tricks."

"It doesn't work for everything," she continued. "But when I can link [chemistry] to something real, like electromagnetic radiation from cellphones, or nuclear energy, the kids see the relevance of what they're learning, and there is more buy-in. They learn the content better."

Ms. Fahlbush, the social studies teacher, said it "was definitely foreign at first" to be explicitly teaching reading and writing strategies to her students.

"We had that mentality that you're not an English teacher, you're a social studies teacher, so that needs to be taken care of in another class," she said. "When I first started doing it, it definitely did take time away from my content, and I didn't like it."

"But now that I'm in the second year, I see that I am teaching the content, just doing it through the writing assignments. The social studies teachers talk about it; we all see our students writing better, and we can see from their open-ended and constructed responses that they are understanding the concepts better."

## Drawing Students In

The emphasis on analysis and argumentation has paid off with student writing that is not only more informed, but more engaged, said Roger Stainforth, a Dixie Heights High School social studies teacher.

His students got "really fired up" by a recent writing prompt asking them to analyze and take a position on how the search-and-seizure provisions of the U.S. Constitution's Fourth Amendment apply to students in school, Mr. Stainforth said.

"Kids this age want to be heard," he said. "They haven't known how to argue. But man, once they figure it out, they get into



*Meet Shadrack Boakye.*

*College student.*

*Playwright.*

*CEO of a theater troupe.*

*Former READ180 student.*



Shadrack arrived in the U.S. at the age of nine, after fleeing a violent civil war in Liberia. Based on his age, he was placed in fourth grade. With limited formal schooling and no English skills, Shadrack fell further and further behind his peers. By the time he reached eighth grade, he was placed in special education. By the age of 14, Shadrack felt disenfranchised from school and held out little hope for graduation, let alone a future that included college and a fulfilling career. Even worse, he began drifting into a world characterized by violence and despair.

Fortunately, eighth grade was also the year Shadrack walked into Mrs. Murphy's *READ 180* class. He began to see improvement in his skills, and found that success was "addictive." Equipped with meaningful data, lots of engaging text, and adaptive technology, Mrs. Murphy was able to facilitate a personalized learning path for Shadrack that built his skills, and his confidence. She put a pen in his hand and encouraged him to start writing about his experiences. He hasn't put it down since.

Today, no one is prouder of Shadrack than Mrs. Murphy. The one-time special education student and English language learner is a college sophomore, a playwright, and CEO of a theatre troupe that performs in schools all over the country. His message to other young people: You have more power than you think.



# Literacy for College & Career

[read180.com/commoncore](http://read180.com/commoncore)

## Template tasks create work for students ...

Template tasks are fill-in-the-blank “shells” that allow teachers to insert the texts to be read, writing to be produced, and content to be addressed.

**Task 12 Template** [Insert question] After reading \_\_\_\_\_, write a/an \_\_\_\_\_ that defines \_\_\_\_\_ and explains \_\_\_\_\_. Support your discussion with evidence from the text(s). What \_\_\_\_\_ can you draw?

<b>ELA Example:</b>	What is a “metaphor”? After reading <i>The House on Mango Street</i> and drawing from other works you’ve read this year, write an essay that defines “metaphor” and explains how authors use it to enhance their writing. Support your discussion with evidence from the texts.
<b>Social Studies Example:</b>	What did the authors of the American Constitution mean by “rights”? After reading the Bill of Rights, write an essay that defines “rights” and explains “rights” as the authors use it in this foundational document. Support your discussion with evidence from the text. What implications can you draw?
<b>Science Example:</b>	Can “talent” be learned? After reading scientific sources, write an essay that defines “innate abilities” and explains its relevance to “talent.” Support your discussion with evidence from the texts.

## BURROWING DOWN: A Collection of Template Tasks

Teachers in Kentucky use models to craft questions for their students that elicit in-depth responses equiring them to research and justify their answers.

SOURCE:  
Literacy Design  
Collaborative

What would you recommend to help your community improve its air quality?

What ramifications does debt have for individuals and the larger public?

Does genetic testing have the potential to significantly impact how we treat disease?

How did the political views of the signers of the Constitution impact the American political system?

After researching government documents on term limits, write an essay that identifies a problem created by term limits and argues for a solution.

it! I used to get a few graphs from them, but now I get pages.”

Students who have faced the writing prompts notice a difference between them and the kinds of assignments they got before their district began using the template tasks.

“It looked so innocent, just that little paragraph, but man, it was way harder than it looked,” said Dylan Rohrer, a Dixie Heights senior who had to write in a social studies course last year about whether juveniles should be tried as adults.

“We spent like two weeks researching stuff, and we had to justify everything we said. I’m a pretty good writer, and I can usually just get by, writing, you know, whatever,” he said with a sheepish laugh. “But I actually had to think through things. When I was done, I considered it an accomplishment. It was interesting to be challenged in school.”

The Kentucky education department is working to spread the template-task idea to districts statewide through a statewide group of networks it built as a vehicle to scale up common-standards implementation.

Specialists tapped by the state meet monthly with regional groups of teachers, principals, and district leaders to discuss the literacy-design-collaborative work. In that way, the 166 Kentucky school districts that don’t have foundation grants to use those models can learn about them from the eight that do, and adapt as they wish.

“The leadership networks are built on the premise of building the capacity of every single district to implement the standards in the context of highly effective teaching, learning, and assessment practices,” said Karen Kidwell, who oversees the networks for the state education department.

“We focus on the questions, ‘What is the intent of each standard, and how do you translate those into effective instruction and generate acceptable evidence of student mastery?’”

Regina Pelfrey, the literacy coach at Arnett Elementary School, in the Erlanger-Elsemere district, said the network meetings have been a powerful way to transmit the Literacy Design Collaborative strategy from neighboring Kenton County. The state’s local network leader, Ruthie Staley, has helped the 2,200-student Erlanger district adapt the ideas for elementary school, Ms. Pelfrey said. “I have to give the state a lot of



PHOTOS BY PAT MCDONOUGH FOR EDUCATION WEEK

**Beth Fahlbush answers a question for juniors during a U.S. history class at Scott High School. She and other social studies and science teachers in Kentucky are responsible for literacy instruction in their classes.**

credit,” Ms. Pelfrey said during a break at Arnett. “Teachers are always having to learn new things that the state wants them to learn, but in the 25 years that I’ve been in education, there was never this kind of help.”

### Making ‘Targets’

At Arnett, teachers have been working with Ms. Pelfrey to create “learning targets” and a curriculum map that are based on the common standards and reflect the skills and processes outlined in the literacy-collaborative template tasks.

A standard that asks 1st graders to “ask and answer questions about key details in text,” for instance, becomes a “target,” posted on a classroom wall, that says, “I will ask and answer questions about details in my story.”

At the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade levels, teachers are using Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Depth of Knowledge framework to include verbs in those learning targets that reflect higher-level thinking processes, such as “analyze” or “critique,” Ms. Pelfrey said.

The Depth of Knowledge framework, designed by University of Wisconsin-Madison professor Norman Webb as a model to align standards and tests, also can be used as an aid in designing student tasks that reflect the standards. Bloom’s Taxonomy, created in the mid-1950s, is a method of classifying levels and types of cognitive processes.

Many Arnett teachers are including their students

in designing the learning targets, Ms. Pelfrey said. In Loretta Simpson’s 4th grade class, students helped create a target that says, “We will critique peers’ writing using six good writing traits.”

“They chose that word, ‘critique,’” said Ms. Simpson. “We talked about what it was they would be doing, and the right word to describe it, and that is what they chose.”

Ms. Pelfrey admits that when she was teaching, she would have just walked her students through a compare-and-contrast exercise and given them questions.

“It would have been me doing it,” she said. “If the teacher creates it alone, the students are just watching. Transferring the work to the students is key.”

### No Spoon-Feeding

But it can be challenging. Arnett teachers are asking students to do things they’re not used to doing.

In Trisha Bremer’s 2nd grade class, the children recently read *Max Found Two Sticks*, Brian Pinkney’s story about a boy who drums on his front stoop because he doesn’t feel like talking to anyone. Then she asked the children to write about what Max was thinking and to point to places in the text that led them to say so.

“It was very challenging for them,” she said. “They were saying, ‘Please just tell me the right answer!’ But the discussion was awesome. Light bulbs were going off. They realized there was no right or wrong answer, as long as they could defend their answer with examples.”

Students in Dottie Durham's 5th grade class were doing something similar: combing through a text for clues about characters' thinking.

They had just read a story about two men sharing a hospital room. Both were confined to their beds, but only one could see out the window, and he described the scenes of life outside for his roommate, who grew increasingly glum.

Quiet minutes went by as students pored over the text. One student, seizing on a sentence that said the man's feelings were "fermenting," offered that he was "getting sour and mean" about his deprivation. Ms. Durham nodded and said, "Good, very interesting."

Those quiet minutes can be among the most difficult parts of the new standards' expectations, teachers in Kenton and Erlanger schools said. Learning to direct students back to the texts to search for answers, evidence, clues to meaning—rather than just supplying those answers—is not familiar practice for many teachers.

Kris Gillis struggled with that recently. An English teacher at Dixie Heights High School, Mr. Gillis said that in his nine years as a teacher, his students "have depended largely on me for meaning." But he is shifting strategies, trying to help students become more self-sufficient in understanding what they read.

That played out when he asked a class of seniors to analyze six poems by American and English writers, with the aid of explanations by Harvard University poetry professor Helen Vendler and the College Board's Advanced Placement TP-CASTT framework for analyzing poetry.

The students had several days to read and analyze the poems, and then they were expected to "teach the class" how to read them, Mr. Gillis said. They took turns presenting their "lessons" in groups, with their teacher sitting in the back, listening.

"It got really uncomfortable at times," he said. "They kept directing questions to me, and I kept putting the questions back to them."

The students delivered a mixed bag; some of their interpretations were well-grounded in the text and others less so, Mr. Gillis said. A few of the students complained that their teacher hadn't taken a stronger role in guiding the discussion, he said.

"So I asked them, 'Why do you think I didn't?' There was a pause for a second, and one of them said, 'Because we have to get it ourselves?' And I said, 'Right.'" ■

*Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).*

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# Districts Gird for Added Use of Nonfiction

By Catherine Gewertz

In an English/language arts classroom in Iowa, 10th graders are analyzing the rhetoric in books about computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, the working poor, chocolate-making, and diamond-mining.

Their teacher, Sarah Brown Wessling, let them choose books about those real-world topics as part of a unit on truth. Students are dissecting the sources, statistics, and anecdotes the authors use to make their arguments in books like *Branded* by Alissa Quart and *Nickel and Dime* by Barbara Ehrenreich. An earlier unit in the class at Johnston High School, in a Des Moines suburb, focused on film documentaries.

The units mark a heftier emphasis on nonfiction for Ms. Wessling. What she is doing reflects an intensifying focus for teachers across the country: how to develop students' skills at reading and understanding informational texts.

Teachers are rebalancing their fiction-and-nonfiction scales because the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts demand it. Since all but four states have adopted those guidelines, millions of teachers are now faced with the challenge of revising materials and instruction accordingly.

"Often, our nod to nonfiction is the autobiography or true-story version of something," said Ms. Wessling, who was the 2010 National Teacher of the Year. "But there's a real gap in other kinds of nonfiction. Students absolutely understand how to read a piece of fiction with a beginning, middle, and end. But that's not how you read things like *Nickel and Dime*. It's a much slower process.

"I'm relying on different kinds of strategies and a lot more explicit teaching," she

said. "We spend a lot of time talking about attributes of nonfiction, like how to read an interview. Or how to tell the difference between fact and opinion."

As states and districts press more deeply into informational text, however, some experts are cautioning them to maintain a proper balance with fiction.

"While we think the emphasis on informational text is a useful idea, our concern is that it could move from being an emphasis to a sole approach," Richard M. Long, the director of governmental relations for the International Reading Association, said in an email. "Using fiction has many positive and useful values, and it shouldn't be lost or pushed so far to the sidelines that it disappears."

Every state and district official interviewed for this story hastened to note, without being asked, that fiction would maintain a central position in the curriculum.

## Addressing a Need

The common standards' emphasis on informational text arose in part from research suggesting that employers and college instructors found students weak at comprehending technical manuals, scientific and historical journals, and other texts pivotal to their work in those arenas.

Influencing the standards, also, were the frameworks for the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, which reflect an increasing emphasis on informational texts as students get older. They draw equally from informational and literary passages at the 4th grade level. But by 8th grade, the tilt toward informational reading reaches 55 percent, and by 12th grade, it's 70 percent.

The common core's vision of informa-

tional text includes literary nonfiction, as well as historical documents, scientific journals and technical manuals, biographies and autobiographies, essays, speeches, and information displayed in charts, graphs, or maps, digitally or in print. Helping students tackle complex examples of such genres across the disciplines—from English to engineering—bolsters them for work and higher education by building foundational knowledge, vocabulary, and literacy strategies, common-core advocates contend.

Many states and districts are responding to the new emphasis on nonfiction with new materials and training.

New York City singled out informational text as this year's focus in its work to get ready for the common standards in English/language arts.

Josh Thomases, the deputy chief academic officer for instruction, said the district conducted professional development aimed at helping teachers think through how to craft instructional units and tasks reflecting the shift in the standards. Teachers at each of the 1,700 schools in the city developed one unit and task and are now discussing them in multischool meetings, he said.

To support that work, the 1.1 million-student district set up a digital “common-core library” that includes 13 “bundles” of sample activities, lesson plans, and other resources for instruction based on informational text. One example, from 3rd grade, is based on learning about sharks.

The immediate challenge of the informational-text emphasis, however, lies more in training than in materials, Mr. Thomases said.

“Most teachers are not taught how to teach reading,” he said. “Teachers, especially secondary teachers, need help figuring out what they’re going to do to pause long enough in the teaching to have students grapple with text describing the real world. That’s our task.”

“It’s not so much that we have the wrong materials in our schools, but [it’s] actually figuring out how to structure classrooms so we speak to text and kids are using text in conversations with each other and are grappling with the meaning of text. We can do that with the texts at hand,” he said.

“In the longer term, yes, we need to make sure that by the end of high school, students are reading science journals,” Mr. Thomases continued. “But right now, just simply the act of reading the science textbook and absolutely making the textbook—rather than the teacher—generate the answers. ... If we did that in every classroom across America, we would see very different outcomes.”

Two-thirds of the schools in New York City opt in to the district’s curriculum, Mr.



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Thomases said. The district is talking with publishers to “push the vendor community” to create a literacy curriculum it considers reflective of the common standards, he said.

### Publishers Respond

Pearson, for one, is including more “content-rich nonfiction” material in its K-12 programs, said Mike Evans, who oversees math and reading products for the New York City-based education company. In an upcoming revision of its Reading Street program, a 4th grade unit on patterns in nature includes text selections on tornado sirens and the migration of Arctic terns. Supporting materials walk teachers through ways to help students “unlock” those texts, Mr. Evans said in an email.

Designers working on a new digital curriculum in a joint project of the Pearson Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation aim to reflect the new standards’ emphasis as well.

The literacy curriculum is still being created. But one idea under consideration is a 5th grade unit on networks that would blend reading about the Underground Railroad with study of very different types of networks, such as online social networks and political-advocacy networks, said Sally Hampton, who is one of the curriculum designers on the project and also served on the

**Sarah Brown Wessling uses these nonfiction books, among others, in her 10th grade English/language arts classroom in Johnston, Iowa, to reflect the Common Core State Standards’ emphasis on informational text.**

panel that wrote the English/language arts common standards.

In the past two years, New York City-based Scholastic Education has seen a rise in demand for training to help teachers teach reading of informational texts, said Patrick Daley, the senior vice president of the company's classroom and community group, which writes K-10 English/language arts programs.

"It's one thing to tell school districts that we must do close reading of informational text," he said. "It's very different to say, 'Here is what's involved with a close reading.'"

Last summer, Scholastic launched Every-day Literacy, a K-6 program that incorporates brochures, catalogs, menus, and other text types, and includes suggestions for ways teachers can walk students through the elements in each type of text, Mr. Daley said.

This spring, it plans to launch XBOOKS, a print and digital middle school program with strands on such topics as forensics, which will explore DNA analysis and fingerprinting.

Florida's Broward County school district is spending \$787,000 to put a new Scholastic program, Buzz About IT, into all its K-2 classrooms in response to the new standards' emphasis on informational text (which is abbreviated in the program's title). The read-aloud program will supplement the 258,000-student district's core elementary literacy program, Macmillan McGraw-Hill's Treasures, said Teri Acquavita, an elementary reading-curriculum specialist in the district.

She said that Treasures does include some informational text, "but not sufficiently, we would say. We wanted something that would supplement that." The district is now weighing options for similar supplements for grades 3-12, Ms. Acquavita said. Supplements for the early grades came first because Florida is rolling out the common standards in phases, beginning in the lower grades, she said.

Meanwhile, Broward's elementary reading coaches have met with Nell K. Duke, the Michigan State University professor who wrote Buzz About IT, and are meeting monthly to study her research, Ms. Acquavita said. They also have had training in the program from Scholastic. Next year, the state will conduct a full review of its statewide materials adoption, she said.

## Budgets Tight

Funding for materials and professional development that reflect the standards could prove to be an issue for states, and, as a result, for companies that produce them, said Jay Diskey, the executive director of the

school division of the Association of American Publishers.

"We have been unpleasantly surprised that a number of states are only now starting to wrestle with the cost of this," he said. "The three traditional drivers of this market are changes in standards, enrollment increases, and availability of funding. If one of those things isn't there, such as funding, well, what do you have?"

Oregon will conduct a full review of its statewide adoption list in English/language arts in 2013 with an eye toward common-standards implementation, said Drew Hinds, an education specialist with the state education department. This year is a "bridge year," in which the state is inviting its currently contracted publishers to provide updated materials to address gaps between the existing ones and the common core, he said.

New criteria for adoptions of basal instructional materials for the bridge year, approved by the state in January, specify that materials must include "high-quality, complex informational text" in the ratios specified by the standards. Its statewide literacy plan delves into explanations of six major shifts in the English/language arts standards, and the state has also produced an online "toolkit" offering teachers instructional videos and other resources on those shifts.

North Carolina is concentrating more on training teachers than on changing materials, said Maria Pitre-Martin, the state director of K-12 curriculum and instruction.

"What we have discovered is that within schools, there is a great deal of informational text already there," she said. "It's really about what is the difference between teaching with those materials and teaching with fiction."

Using federal Race to the Top money, North Carolina is conducting training institutes that focus, among other topics, on how to teach informational text, she said.

The biggest concern state officials are hearing from teachers is that they be assured of having adequate lesson plans, curriculum maps, and other resources to teach the standards once that begins in 2012-13, Ms. Pitre-Martin said.

To convey its expectations for new materials, the state has hosted a webinar for publishers, pointing them to the "publishers' criteria" developed by the common-standards writers for grades K-2 and 3-12, which describe what is required for materials to align well with the standards.

*Coverage of "deeper learning" that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.*

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PART



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Francie Alexander

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How can we prevent third grade retention? We know what is needed—systematic, individualized phonics instruction is the antidote.

**3**  
PART



Dr. Ted Hasselbring



Margery Mayer

#### Part 3: Technology: The Great Equalizer by Dr. Ted Hasselbring & Margery Mayer

Class sizes are on the rise and teachers need support to individualize their instruction. There is the proven algorithm to build mastery and achieve success.

**4**  
PART



Dr. Julie Washington



Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan

#### Part 4: Turning Challenges Into Strengths by Dr. Julie Washington & Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan

How do we serve the language development needs and close the word gap for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

**5**  
PART



Dr. Anne Cunningham



Dr. David Rose

#### Part 5: This Is Your Brain on Reading by Dr. Anne Cunningham & Dr. David Rose

How is knowledge acquired and built and what role does reading play?

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**1**  
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It's a great time to start school. Advances in neuroscience have yielded fresh insight into how the brain develops and the physiological processes that drive learning. New classroom technologies help teachers engage students, personalize instruction, and capture information to better meet individual needs. The Common Core State Standards—adopted by 45 states—set a high bar to ensure that rigorous expectations remain constant from district to district and state to state. These standards renew the national focus on preparing our children for success in a competitive global economy by clearly defining what it means to be college and career ready, starting in kindergarten.

### THE READINESS GAP

Statistically, 30% of these children won't graduate in 2025. As expectations of our youngest learners increase, demographic trends paint a picture of decreasing readiness. Nationally, more than 1 in 5 children are poor—with many more at risk of slipping below the poverty line. Poverty is rising, especially for young children. Children under five are the poorest age group in America, with 1 in 4 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers living in poverty during the years of greatest brain development. Poverty and weakened families play out in decreased opportunities for young children to learn and succeed in school.

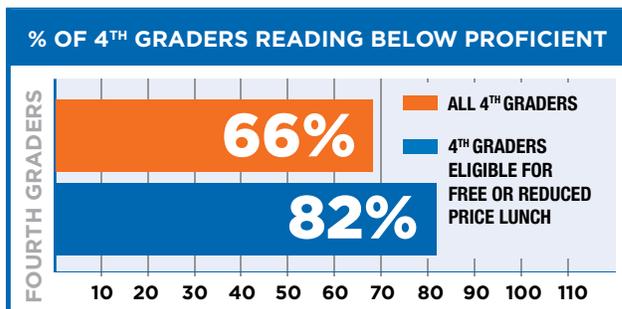
### OUR FIRST "MINORITY MAJORITY" GENERATION

The class of 2025 will also be more diverse than at any time in our history. In 2011, over 50 percent of all babies born in the United States were non-white. Immigration from around

the world, particularly from Spanish-speaking nations and Asia, has resulted in an increase in English Language Learners. One in 20 U.S. school children struggles with English. These students will require an intensive focus on oral language development, vocabulary, and syntax if they are to have equal access to the American Dream.

### BUSINESS AS USUAL IS NOT WORKING

Reading is the gateway to success in every subject, including math and science. Yet our nation's only consistent yardstick, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), paints a sobering picture of reading achievement:



Fourth grade reading scores are the product of instruction in the primary grades. Without the ability to read, children may fall further behind every year, eventually finding themselves unable to succeed in the workforce.

### COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS = OPPORTUNITY IN AN UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE

Many of the careers today's students will enter don't exist yet. What will the world these students enter look like?

To read the full article and learn more about this series visit [iread.com](http://iread.com).

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# Common Standards Ignite Debate Over Student 'Prereading' Exercises

By Catherine Gewertz

**S**parked by the Common Core State Standards, teachers and literacy experts are arguing about the role of a time-honored pillar of English/language arts instruction: classroom activities designed to help students understand what they are about to read.

The attacks on—and defenses of—"prereading" are unfolding largely in cyberspace, through online forums, blogs, and email exchanges. What's triggering them is educators' reactions to the new standards and two key explanatory resources created by their architects: a set of "publishers' criteria" and videotaped sample lessons.

That trio has created an impression in some quarters that the intent of the standards is to "ban"—in the words of one blogger—prereading and instead ask students to approach texts "cold," with no upfront assistance. That would represent a sharp turnabout from current practice.

Even as the standards' authors insist that their aim is not to abolish prereading, but to curtail and revamp it, the debates persist, pitting schools of thought on reading instruction against one another. Teachers are asking themselves how to honor the heart of the practice, which is intended to help all students access text from a level playing field, but also to learn from its mistakes.

The debates, some in the field say, open the door to a broad-based re-examination of how to approach reading instruction.

"What's being played out in front of us is a war for the soul of English/language arts," said Alan L. Sitomer, a Los Angeles high school teacher who was California's teacher of the year in 2007.

## Interpreting the Standards

If the debates over prereading are a war, one of the battlegrounds has been the standards themselves, with critics claiming that they eliminate prereading.

But defenders of the standards argue that they do no such thing. The documents call for students to be able to read "independently" and "proficiently," without "significant scaffolding"—instructional supports—by teachers.

The standards also note that students may have added need for teacher assistance when wrestling with material above their reading level.

"If someone is reading that as eliminating prereading activities, they're reading it incorrectly," said Kelly Gallagher, an Anaheim, Calif., high school English/language arts teacher and the author of *Readicide* and other popular books about adolescent literacy. "But once you get into the publishers' criteria," he said, "it gets murkier."

Written by the two lead writers of the English/language arts common standards, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, those criteria were designed as guidelines for the development of curricular materials that embody the standards.

But the criteria also include instructional strategies, and that inclusion has prompted many educators to accuse the writers of violating a promise made in the introduction to the standards: They "define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach."

"What's in the publishers' criteria is at odds with the 'defining the what and not the how,'" Mr. Sitomer said. "I am a big, big fan of the standards. But when the authors of the 'what' wade into the 'how,' it carries an awful lot of weight, and this is baggage that the movement doesn't need."

"There's a disconnect between the standards and what the publishers' criteria say about prereading," said P. David Pearson, a professor of language and literacy at the University of California, Berkeley's Graduate School of Education.

## Publishers' Criteria

The parts of the publishers' criteria that have many teachers up in arms advise that "text should be central" in instruction, "and surrounding materials should be included only when necessary, so as not to distract from the text itself." Publishers, the criteria for grades 3-12 say, "should be extremely sparing in offering activities that are not text-based." When "productive struggle with the text is exhausted, questions rather than explanations

can help focus the student's attention" on facets of the text that can aid in comprehension, they say.

"I'm concerned that some teachers may read this and think, 'Ooh, I shouldn't do any prereading activity with my kids,'" said Mr. Gallagher. "I think that's an incorrect reading. And it's not in our kids' best interest."

Mr. Coleman points out that the criteria specifically allow for scaffolding. But it's scaffolding that "enables all students to experience the complexity of the text, rather than avoid it," he said.

Such strategies, he said, "should not preempt or replace the text by translating its contents for students or telling students what they are going to learn in advance of reading the text; the scaffolding should not become an alternate, simpler source of information that diminishes the need for students to read the text itself carefully."

The K-2 criteria echo those themes and allow for scaffolding "when necessary," "prior to and during the first read" that focuses on "words and concepts that are essential to a basic understanding and that students are not likely to know or be able to determine from context."

## No 'Ban'

"The publishers' criteria never, and very clearly don't now, in any way abolish or ban prereading," Mr. Coleman said in an interview. "They are very clear that strategic uses of prereading that don't pre-empt the text are consistent with the standards. We need to ensure that kids actually grapple with text."

He added that the criteria have been revised repeatedly, based on the input of teachers, literacy experts such as Mr. Pearson, and others. On the topic of prereading and scaffolding, the most recent version takes care to "leave room for a wide range of instructional approaches" that engage students in reading, while at the same time "setting some basic parameters based on the standards," such as ensuring that scaffolding "does not pre-empt or replace the need to read the text," Mr. Coleman said in an email.

Mr. Coleman acknowledged, however, that in speaking engagements and videotaped

sample common-core lessons, he might have contributed to the impression that common-core authors want to eliminate prereading.

In those settings, he has been frank and emphatic about his view that prereading activities have “spiraled out of control,” he said. “I appreciate that my words encouraged a one-sided view, and I am trying to be more careful in my public statements to take a more nuanced view,” he said.

Mr. Coleman has company, though, in his view that prereading strategies need an overhaul.

“What they are reacting to is really appropriate,” said Tim Shanahan, who chairs the department of curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education. “There is some really bad prereading going on out there, and the field has just sat on its hands. So the notion of someone calling us on it is fair.”

As part of his current research, Mr. Shanahan has been viewing scores of videotaped K-3 reading lessons, and a startling portion of them are “atrocious,” he said. In one kindergarten example, the teacher spends 20 minutes preparing children for a six-minute reading.

By the time they actually read the book, “there wasn’t a single shred of an idea in there that the kids didn’t already know,” he said. “What they were learning was that reading [the text] wasn’t really necessary.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Shanahan said, “just because lots of people are doing it badly doesn’t mean we shouldn’t do it at all. The question should be, how can we do prereading better?”

In a blog post penned in response to the hubbub over prereading, Mr. Shanahan, who served on one of the panels that helped shape the common standards, offered six guidelines that should shape the practice, from keeping prereading brief and strategic to making sure it “reveals instead of conceals” the text.

### Ignoring Research?

The debate about prereading has angered many educators who cut their teeth on the research and theory that helped forge such strategies.

“To argue that meaning resides solely in the text is antithetical to several decades of research which shows that meaning is in the interaction of reader and text,” said Karen K. Wixson, a literacy expert who served with Mr. Shanahan on the writing team for the common standards and is the dean of the education school at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

In the current move to curtail prereading, Mr. Pearson hears the echoes of the “new criticism” of the late 1920s and 1930s, which focused solely on text for meaning and helped

shape literacy instruction for many years.

He also sees a reaction to multiple strands of thought that have reshaped it in recent decades: the idea that studying an author’s life is important to understanding a text; the view that “directed reading activities,” such as supplying background information or word definitions or helping students predict what might happen in a text, are key aids to comprehension; and the recognition that people learn new things best when they connect them to what they already know.

But when sound ideas wander into excess in practice, Mr. Pearson said, a backlash can’t be far behind.

“In too many classrooms, the actual text never enters the discussion,” he said. “It’s all about kids’ feelings about it, or their experiences related to it. The teacher spends 45 minutes wallowing in that space, but never gets into the information in the text.”

An overreaction to weak practice, however, risks dispensing with valuable strategies, he said.

“I think they’re making too much of a fetish out of this” push to curtail prereading, Mr. Pearson said. “When you read, the two fundamental things you use to construct meaning are your knowledge base and your version of what the text says.”

Many teachers view prereading strategies as indispensable and see the attempt to restrict them as naive and even disrespectful, given the vacuums in background knowledge many students bring to school.

“I am dealing with kids who are just as smart as kids have always been, but they’re coming to me with much narrower prior knowledge and understanding of the world,” said Mr. Gallagher, a 27-year veteran who teaches at the predominantly low-income Magnolia High School in Anaheim, Calif. “You have to know things to read things.

“I wonder if the framers of the standards understand the high level of frustration that some of my 9th graders have,” he said. “If help from the teacher comes too late in the process, it won’t matter, because they’ve already tuned out.”

To prevent that, and make sure his students can understand what they are about to read, Mr. Gallagher said he has “to do quite a bit of framing to get my kids to the point where they can wrestle with the text.”

But the prereading debate doesn’t need to be an either-or, he said. The key is to make sure that scaffolding “leads students to the wrestling match.”

### Reversing the Order

Christiana Stevenson, a second-year teacher at Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis, has found that she can accomplish both

“After we did the cold reading, we talked about that stuff, because that content knowledge is really important with something like this. But it’s not at all bad to do it after the first reading. Then it was the kids who were driving the understanding. The conversation led to more and more. And then we reread it with more background knowledge. It worked out really well.”

#### CHRISTIANA STEVENSON

Second-Year Teacher, Arsenal Technical High School, Indianapolis

aims—background information and context for students, as well as a “cold read” of the text—in reverse order.

Using that approach, she had her students read the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” without any preparation. As they asked questions, she guided them to more information about civil disobedience and the clergymen’s criticism that prompted his letter.

“After we did the cold reading, we talked about that stuff, because that content knowledge is really important with something like this,” Ms. Stevenson said. “But it’s not at all bad to do it after the first reading. Then it was the kids who were driving the understanding. The conversation led to more and more. And then we reread it with more background knowledge. It worked out really well.”

Employing both cold-reading and prereading strategies is necessary to good literacy instruction, said Doug Lemov, the author of *Teach Like a Champion* and the managing director of the New York City-based Uncommon Schools charter school network.

“Students need to be able to encounter a text, often a disorienting one, and make sense of it on a first read,” said Mr. Lemov. “Common core is right in saying our students need to be able to do that. But I also think that over the long haul, one of the biggest barriers to reading success and comprehension is the knowledge deficit. We need to close that knowledge deficit.”

To do that, teachers have many strategies at their disposal, he noted. They can supply information upfront, when appropriate. They can plan a cold reading but assign texts leading up to it that will fill in knowledge gaps. They can ask students to read a group of surrounding pieces in conjunction with a central text.

“Reading the same thing multiple times is good. Prereading is good. Reading multiple texts is good. The best ‘prereading,’” he said, “is reading.”

At Uncommon Schools, where Mr. Lemov supervises middle-grades literacy, teachers have been using a technique they call “embedded nonfiction,” which they find effective, he said. When reading a novel, they assign four or five nonfiction texts on a related topic.

Recently, when reading *Lily’s Crossing*, a novel set in World War II-era New York City, students stopped after a couple of chapters to read an article on the rationing of supplies during that time, he said. They gained additional perspective on events in the novel with other such articles as they went through it.

“Now, the novel makes more sense because you understand about rationing, and the nonfiction article has meaning because you have come to care about Lily and seen it through her experience,” Mr. Lemov said.

The practice grew from observations within the charter network that students absorbed content better on the second, third, or fourth reading of related materials, he said. Given those observations, cold reading is challenging for students since it “implies reading in a low-absorption-rate context,” he said.

Reading from multiple sources on a topic, combined with rereading, can address that problem, Mr. Lemov said.

*Coverage of “deeper learning” that will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a rapidly changing world is supported in part by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at [www.hewlett.org](http://www.hewlett.org).*

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# Teachers Embedding Standards in Basal-Reader Questions

By Catherine Gewertz  
*Baltimore*

**D**ozens of teachers and literacy specialists from across the country hunkered down at round tables, with laptops, pens, and paper, intent on rewriting the collections that wield tremendous influence over the way millions of U.S. children learn literacy skills: the big-name basal readers.

Trekking to a workshop this week from as far away as San Diego and Anchorage, the educators lugged the teacher’s editions of nine of the most popular basals in the nation. Those heavy volumes were scattered across the tables of a hotel meeting room as the teachers worked: titles such as Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *Trophies*, Pearson’s *Reading Street*, and Macmillan/McGraw Hill’s *Treasures*.

Hailing from 18 school districts in 11 states, the group of about 70 came together in response to the Common Core State Standards in English/language arts, which demand that students hone their skills at understanding and analyzing a variety of texts. To do that, teachers must help them delve more deeply into what they read.

Sponsoring the workshop were two organizations with big stakes in the implementation of the new standards: the Washington-based Council of the Great City Schools, which represents large urban districts, and Student Achievement Partners, a New York-based nonprofit whose founders led the writing of the English/language arts standards. The two groups recognized that in order to reflect the standards’ expectations, teachers must begin asking different kinds of questions than most of those suggested in the teacher’s editions of the popular basal readers.

Since most districts lack money for new textbooks, or their states are not yet scheduled to adopt new ones, the two organizations decided to bring educators together to write new questions for their current materials. The new Basal Alignment Project aims

to build a free, online repository that will include a bank of teacher-written questions and tasks that are more “text-dependent” than those suggested by the publishers; that is, they require students to dig back into their readings to respond to the questions.

More such workshops are planned, including one in Baton Rouge, La., May 7-8. Student Achievement Partners has already created and posted on its website a guide to crafting text-dependent questions. But as the Baltimore workshop began, most participants—an assortment of literacy coaches, curriculum officials, and English-learner specialists—were just beginning to explore the idea.

## Eliminating ‘Text to Self’

David Liben, a former New York City teacher and principal who is now a senior literacy specialist with Student Achievement Partners, and helped write the common standards, said the “goal isn’t to denigrate the basals. They’re just written for different standards.” But he criticized them for paying too much attention to low-level vocabulary and suggesting questions for students that they could answer without reading the text passages.

He reminded the participants that the common standards “virtually eliminate text-to-self connections,” meaning they aim to focus students on figuring out what the text means, rather than how they feel about it. This, he said, is a more solid preparation for college and jobs.

“In college and careers, no one cares how you feel,” Mr. Liben said. “Imagine being asked to write a memo on why your company’s stock price has plummeted: ‘Analyze why and tell me how you feel about it.’” he said, to the chuckles of workshop participants.

That said, students’ own experiences can play a valuable role in understanding the text after the second or third reading, Mr. Liben said. The point, he said, is to keep focused on the text itself when students first

encounter it so they can “develop the muscles” of figuring out its meaning.

Building academic and higher-level vocabulary is also crucial if students are to master more complex texts, Mr. Liben said, and too often, the basals concentrate on simpler words. One passage in “Reading Street,” for instance, emphasizes the meaning of “kind,” overlooking “judgment” and “vision.” But learning to probe such words is important, especially for English-learners, Mr. Liben said.

“We have to do both,” he said. “You can’t deprive them of words like ‘judgment’ and ‘vision.’” Examining only simple words for struggling students “is the achievement gap expanding in front of you,” he said.

For examples of the problems workshop leaders had identified, the group turned to a 3rd grade selection in “Reading Street,” a narrative poem called “When Charlie McButton Lost Power.” It’s about a boy who panics when he can’t use his precious electronic gadgets during a power outage, but unexpectedly finds that he can have plenty of imaginative, non-electronic fun with his little sister.

Examining the suggested questions in the margins of the teacher’s editions, the educators found many that asked students to reflect on their feelings or experiences without having to consult the reading passage for an answer.

One question asked: “What has happened during a bad storm you have experienced?” Another said: “How do you feel when you can’t do your favorite things?”

Participants immediately spotted opportunities to revise them.

“You certainly don’t have to read the text to answer those questions,” said Suzanne Takeda, a language arts specialist with the Los Angeles Unified School District. “But if you change the focus from ‘your’ experience to Charlie’s experience, they wouldn’t be text-to-self questions. They would be more text-dependent.”

Another question asked students to predict what Charlie will do when the power comes back on. That one encourages students to reflect on Charlie and what they’ve learned about him in order to predict what will happen next, which is more consistent with the common standards’ expectations, said Martina Henke, a language arts coordinator from Anchorage.

Rewritten, text-dependent questions for the poem included queries like: “In the last stanza, Charlie had another thought. What was this thought, and why couldn’t he explain it?” And: “In the stanza where Charlie says, ‘Could anything be duller ...,’ what is he talking about? Why is the word ‘anything’ in italics?”

The group reviewed other teacher guidance

accompanying the Charlie McButton poem, including a suggested summary of the poem’s central theme. It was, “If we try new things, we will usually find something we like to do.”

Rachel Etienne, a literacy specialist with Student Achievement Partners, cited that as an example of how basals “ask the teacher to think through the hard parts for the kids, model them, and move on,” leaving little opportunity for students to come up with other ideas or interpretations of the text.

## Reworking an Approach

Using guidelines created by Student Achievement Partners, educators worked on writing new questions that reflected the standards and on thinking differently about how they would prepare for class discussions. The guidelines encouraged them to read each selection and write a synopsis, clearly stating its main themes, then reread it and create text-dependent questions. They could spend time identifying and categorizing vocabulary words to home in on and devising culminating tasks for the reading passage, making a list of which standards would be covered in the lesson.

They used a set of 17 questions to guide their development of queries and tasks for each reading passage. Among them: Does each student have to read the text to answer each question? Do the questions ask students to make inferences that are logically grounded in the text? Are the questions coherently sequenced, building toward a gradual understanding of the text meaning? Does the culminating task call on the knowledge and understanding acquired through study of the passage?

Some participants welcomed the messages as a needed balance to current practice.

“Remember when we were all doing experiential stuff to bring kids in? Well, the pendulum swung way too much that way,” said Sue Doherty Fetsch, a consultant from Anchorage. “Experiential stuff isn’t all bad. You just can’t do it to the level we’ve been doing it.”

Ms. Takeda, from Los Angeles, said the process of reviewing practice and revising questions is “wonderful,” but for it to work well it should unfold among groups of teachers, talking and brainstorming together. But that is a challenge for a big district in the current fiscal environment, she said.

“It’s so important for teachers to do this in groups, together, like we are now, not just have it handed to them,” she said. “[But] it’s very tough with so little resources.”

Other educators raised issues with key themes of the workshop, such as having students approach texts with little or no background preparation.

“We have kids from a lot of cultural backgrounds,” one participant said. “We really do want to level the playing field for them. Some kids don’t have enough language, and multiple readings just won’t do it for them.”

Mr. Liben responded that it’s important to provide targeted supports to students who need it, taking care not to substitute summaries and personal reflections for comprehending what the text says.

A flurry of questions were aimed at when to use prereading strategies and offer students context for their reading, and when to hold those back. What is the role of explicit instruction, asked one teacher. When should a teacher model what she wants students to do, and when should she let them grapple for a while?

There are no easy answers to those questions, Mr. Liben said, and Student Achievement Partners’ approach errs on the side of letting children try to figure out more for themselves and having the teacher step in later, as needed.

How the new ideas will take shape back home was an open question.

“The biggest challenge will be getting elementary teachers to stop using their basals as Bibles,” LaTisha Bryant, a literacy specialist from Memphis, Tenn., said during a break.

Teachers will also worry that if they shift strategies, they won’t be preparing students for the state tests, she said. Tennessee’s assessments are being revised to include more constructed-response items, but they still include a lot that are “rote memorization,” she said.

## Making Revisions

Pearson, like other publishers, has been working to make its reading programs reflect the standards. Nancy Winship, a vice president who oversees the company’s pre-K-12 literacy programs, said Pearson “supports initiatives that are going to help teachers and students be prepared for the common core.

“It’s critical that teachers internalize this and understand what text-dependent questions are at this level, so I applaud them for what they are doing,” she said in an interview.

But she added that the 2008 and 2011 versions of “Reading Street” that were being examined in the workshop hadn’t been updated to reflect the publishers’ criteria that Student Achievement Partners issued in August and revised as recently as this month. Those criteria detail the emphasis on text-dependent questions.

“We would have been happy to provide them with” the newest version of the program, which is being released next week, Ms. Winship said.

That new version revises vocabulary instruction to target discussion at words and phrases from the text, she said. It also suggests three readings of each passage, with the first aiming for understanding and clarification, the second zeroing in for more meaning, and the third geared to differentiated support in small-group instruction, she said.

Questions were revised as well, with text-dependency in mind, Ms. Winship said. For example, in earlier editions, a question for the Charlie McButton poem asked how students think Charlie will respond to his mother's suggestions about how to have fun during a blackout. The revised question now reads: "How does Charlie react to his mom's suggestions? Cite examples from the text to support your answer."

Robin Hall, the Council of the Great City Schools' language arts director, said the goal of the workshops is to finish lists of new questions for at least a few of the reading passages in each of the most popular basals for grades 3-5 by August, so they are available for teachers to use as the 2012-13 school year begins. Project leaders hope to complete questions for all passages from those basals by spring 2013, she said.

The two groups seek to help teachers attain "a shared understanding" of the intent of the standards, said Ricki Price-Baugh, the council's director of academic standards and a former assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction in the Houston schools. They've brought district teams together in a series of meetings since last fall to explore the key shifts of the standards, with a particular emphasis on how to make sure that disadvantaged students, English-learners, and special education students can access them, she said.

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# Sophisticated Language Use Awaits ELLs in Standards

## Students required to go well beyond grammar, vocabulary

By Lesli A. Maxwell

**P**utting the common-core standards into practice in classrooms is a monumental change for teachers in the nation's public schools, but for educators who work with English-language learners, the shifts in instruction are expected to be even more groundbreaking.

That's because the new academic expectations for English/language arts and mathematics now adopted by all but four states require much more sophisticated uses of language than the mishmash of standards that have been in use for years across the states, say language-acquisition experts.

Grammar and vocabulary, for example, are often the primary focus of instruction for English-learners, as is teaching students to master certain language functions, such as suggesting or complimenting. Under the standards developed through the Common Core State Standards Initiative, however, instruction for English-learners will have to move far beyond those fundamental components of learning the language to include instruction on how to read and comprehend complex texts and to construct and convey arguments in writing across the content areas.

"For the most part, the profession has focused on bits and pieces of language," said Aida Walqui, the director of teacher professional-development programs for WestEd, a San Francisco-based education research firm. "The common core is really going to require teachers to move from understanding language as form or function to under-

standing it as activity and giving students the supports they need to participate in academic activities using language.

"Vocabulary and grammar are still important, but at a lower level of importance," she added. "That's going to be a momentous change."

This work will no longer be just the province of English-as-a-second-language teachers. The common core demands that teachers across all content areas teach literacy skills and the so-called "academic language" that is at the heart of their area of expertise.

As some states and districts—such as the Miami-Dade County school system in Florida, where 58,000 students are English-learners—push ahead on an early timeline with turning the standards into actual classroom instruction, language scholars, policymakers, advocates, and educators around the country continue to wrestle with important questions about how the language needs of English-learners will be met under the more-rigorous standards. A number of small- and large-scale efforts are taking shape to develop tools, resources, and instructional supports to help ensure that English-learners—the fastest-growing subgroup of students in the nation—will have the same access to the rigorous instructional levels of the common core as their peers who are native English speakers.

### 'Academic' vs. Everyday

Helping English-learners surmount the higher expectations of the common standards will depend largely on how well teachers get them to understand academic language, in contrast to the informal, everyday English they use outside the classroom.

One of the most far-reaching efforts under way to help teachers in that vein

is a project led by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment consortium, a group of 27 states that currently share a common set of English-language-proficiency standards. Using broad input from member states, language experts at WIDA are working to finalize a new edition of the consortium's five English-language-development standards that will show clearly the connections between the content standards of the common core across every grade level and the academic language that will be necessary to teach across the varying levels of English proficiency.

For example, in 1st grade, the common core calls for pupils to “write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.” The WIDA edition clearly spells out the grade-level vocabulary words and expressions that teachers should use—such as fact, paragraph, topic sentence, main idea, detail—while teaching that writing standard to students at all levels of English development. The WIDA edition also offers example topics that are pulled directly from a content standard in the common core and provide teachers with the types of support and scaffolding of academic language that they need depending on students' proficiency.

The new edition is also more explicit in showing teachers the cognitive demands required of the core-content standards and how to adjust instruction in line with English proficiency.

“I am hoping that teachers can see how to differentiate their instruction, so that even if you are a level-one English-learner, your teacher is going to have the tools to help you access the content even though you don't have much English,” said Margo Gottlieb, WIDA's lead developer of common assessments for English-learners.

The final version of WIDA's English-language-development standards should be published by June, and, starting in late summer, the group will hold four regional conferences around the country to provide training to teachers and school administrators on the new edition and its connections to the common standards.

WIDA is also leading the effort of a group of 28 states to design new assessments of English-language proficiency that will measure the language demands of the common standards.

### Readying Exemplars

Another major initiative unfolding to craft an array of free instructional resources for teachers of English-learners is centered at

Stanford University, where Kenji Hakuta, an education professor and an expert on English-learners, is co-chairing a project with Maria Santos, a former director of English-learner programs for the New York City school system, that will map out the English-language demands of the common standards. Ms. Walqui of WestEd is also on that team of experts.

Earlier this month, the team launched its Understanding Language website with a dozen papers related to the common core and ELLs, along with a collection of practice and policy briefs that will address key issues.

The project is well-funded, with separate, \$1 million grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (Both foundations also support some areas of coverage in *Education Week*.)

Ms. Walqui said the group is hard at work devising “exemplars” to demonstrate to teachers what planning a unit for ELLs under the common core would look like. The first exemplar, she said, is scheduled to come out in June and will focus on middle school English/language arts, because “it's a critical transition point for English-learners.”

The key for lesson planning is that the goals for students must be the same, Ms. Walqui said, but that there are multiple pathways for students of varying developmental levels of English to achieve the goals.

“The differentiation is within the activities or versions of the activities for students,” she said.

As the team publishes its exemplars, it will host webinars to train teachers, Ms. Walqui said.

The Council of the Great City Schools—which represents 67 urban school systems that are home to 30 percent of the nation's English-learners—is involved in a multitude of initiatives to help its member districts implement the common standards as thoughtfully and carefully for ELLs as they do for students who are not learning English. The rigor of the common core is also providing a prime opportunity for some districts to improve their services for English-learners, said Gabriela Uro, the manager of English-language-learner policy and research for the Washington-based council.

“The English-language-learner programs in many of our districts need ramping up anyway, and now they understand that if you are going to improve those programs, you needn't bother improving to the current standard,” Ms. Uro said. “You need to design it for the common core.”

For nearly two years, the council has offered sessions on the common core during the regular meetings Ms. Uro conducts with district directors of English-learner pro-

“ We have been very focused on making everything readable for kids, and they haven't been as successful in independently reading difficult texts.”

### KAREN SPIGLER

Administrative Director, Language Arts/Reading And Bilingual Education/World Languages, Miami-Dade County School System

grams. Part of that has included bringing in language-acquisition experts to explain the implications of the new standards for ELLs and to show explicitly, for example, how to teach complex texts to English-learners.

The council is also coordinating a project to help districts provide information to parents of ELLs by writing guides on the new standards in Spanish, Chinese, and up to eight additional languages that are represented in urban school systems.

Ms. Uro is also serving on the steering committee of the Stanford project to keep “the district perspective in the mix and to make sure that we bring all of this down to a greater applicability at the district level.”

### Districts Adapt

In the 345,000-student Miami-Dade school system, teachers and school administrators are largely forging ahead on their own to adapt the new standards for English-learners, said Karen Spigler, the administrative director of language arts/reading and bilingual education/world languages for the district. This year, the common-core standards are already implemented in kindergarten and 1st grade, with 2nd and 3rd grades on tap to begin in the fall, she said.

The district offered teams of teachers in those early grades a two-day training to focus on how to bridge instruction—especially in reading—from the state standards they have been using to the common core, Ms. Spigler said.

A major component of that training, she said, was explaining to teachers how they must incorporate more nonfiction into the curriculum and how to figure out ways to judge the complexity of those texts for students.

“Our early-grade teachers think about children reading ‘stories,’ but we have to shift our thinking to how do we prepare them to read a science piece or something about the environment,” she said.

Another big shift for teachers—especially those working with ELLs—will be letting students struggle with difficult texts.

“That’s huge,” Ms. Spigler said. “We have been very focused on making everything readable for kids, and they haven’t been as successful in independently reading difficult texts.”

The vast majority of English-learners in public schools are native Spanish-speakers. That reality has led to at least one large-scale, formal undertaking to translate the common standards into Spanish and provide “linguistic augmentation” to account for the differences between the two languages when necessary.

Called Common Core en Español, the project is being led by ELL practitioners in San Diego, in collaboration with San Diego State University, the California education department, and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

“We are staying very aligned with the common core. It’s the same content,” said Silvia C. Dorta-Duque de Reyes, a bilingual-services coordinator in the San Diego County office of education. “But because of the challenges that English-learners face in accessing academic content as they learn the language, one of the ways to differentiate for them is to provide the access through their primary language.”

The content standards have already been translated, Ms. Reyes said, and now the team is in the midst of providing the “augmentation” to show, for example, that in Spanish, students must learn accentuation and accent rules.

After a peer-review process over the summer, the goal is to publish the translations and make them available to all states and school districts by the end of the year, she said.

Ms. Reyes is also serving on a key panel of experts in California who are charged with revising the state’s English-language-development standards so that they are in line with the common core. And she is providing professional-development seminars to school administrators and leaders to help them prepare for implementation in another year or so.

Many frontline teachers in California, however, aren’t at the point of being trained for the shift to the common core. The new assessments for common core will roll out during the 2014-2015 school year.

“These teachers are still being held accountable for results on the [state test],” Ms. Reyes said.

Published July 10, 2012, in *Education Week*

## COMMENTARY

# Four Myths About the ELA Common-Core Standards

By Dina Strasser and Cheryl Dobbertin

**DINA:** Let me admit this up front: I can be a professional developer’s nightmare. I am a skeptical, informed, judgmental know-it-all, and can typically be found sitting in the back with my elbows perched on my knees, listening with unnerving intensity, and asking questions incessantly.

Professional development consultant Cheryl Dobbertin has graciously, even eagerly, put up with me over the past few years, and in May, she visited my school for a session on the English/language arts Common Core State Standards. I’ve written (skeptically—surprise!) about the common core before, and came fully armed to Cheryl’s session: I trusted her to take my skepticism head on.

She did. And we realized together that there are some critical aspects of implementing the ELA standards that have been obscured by polarizing debates.

**CHERYL:** No matter what Dina says, don’t believe that all professional developers and coaches find engaged, thoughtful, questioning teachers to be a nightmare! In fact, they are a constant source of energy for me.

Recently I’ve had lots of opportunities to help teachers think about the changes that the common core is bringing their way. I notice that there hasn’t been a lot of time or attention devoted to teasing out the subtleties of the standards or accompanying instructional shifts.

Dina and I have identified four myths. These statements often appear to be accepted as fact (and are sometimes delivered to teachers that way) but are not actually aligned with the spirit and intention of the ELA common-core standards. Dina tackles 1 and 4, and I tackle 2 and 3.

### Myth #1: Text complexity is a fixed number.

**DINA:** Let’s be honest: The ELA teacher in me shivers with intuitive horror at the idea of pinning a complexity number on my beloved, earth-moving texts: novels, plays, poems. Like others, I worry about the overzealous use of arbitrary quantitative mea-

sures (such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid) to mark texts’ difficulty.

Imagine my delight, then, to find this statement buried deep in Appendix A:

“In the meantime, the Standards recommend that multiple quantitative measures be used whenever possible and that their results be confirmed or overruled by a qualitative analysis of the text in question.”

And there it is: All things being equal, qualitative measures of text complexity trump quantity. Qualitative measurement is where we find the breathing room to make considered, nuanced choices about what is “complex” for our students—collectively and individually. Cheryl shared an instrument of qualitative measurement with us, in fact, and it made my heart sing.

It’s important to have this arrow in your quiver. In an educational landscape laced with high-stakes testing, budget cuts, and stress, it’s going to be very, very tempting for all of us to fall back on “the numbers” rather than taking the time to make sure that we have nuanced and accurate arguments about what is “complex” for our students.

Recently, faced with eight reading assessments to create within two hours, I was tempted to go straight to the numbers, relying solely upon them. But I didn’t—because I don’t trust them entirely, nor do the standards expect me to.

I hope you’ll join me in making well-informed decisions about text complexity despite pressures from administrators or parents. If anyone questions you, point to page 8 of Appendix A of the common core.

### Myth #2: All prereading activities are inappropriate.

**CHERYL:** Common-core training materials (like this exemplar, for instance) include some not-so-subtle suggestions that “pre-reading” activities and discussions are a bad idea. Over the years, many of us have developed a host of methods to invite students to challenging texts and stimulate the “need to read.” Frankly, the idea that we would say “just start reading” to a roomful of students made me a little crazy.

In my professional circle, we began referring to the “just start reading” strategy as a “cold read,” and we struggled with whether cold reading was always an effective instructional approach.

But then I tried to understand the meaning behind this message about prereading activities. Ultimately, it was about making sure students built comprehension by actually reading a text rather than listening attentively to what others are saying about that text.

Consider a middle school teacher who says, “We are going to start reading Frederick Douglass’ memoir, *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*. This book begins with Douglass telling about his early years, including that he doesn’t know how old he really is. He was born in Maryland ...”

That’s really different from a teacher who says, “We’ve read memoirs before. What are some of the rhetorical devices we might find in a memoir? Ok, now let’s read the first two pages of this memoir together. When you see one of these devices, put a checkmark beside it. Then we will stop to discuss what is going on in this text. Be ready to discuss at least one spot you’ve marked.”

Both of these teachers think they are setting students up to read. But the first teacher’s preview of the plot doesn’t create a need to read, and actually makes it easy for students not to read. That teacher is also missing an opportunity to set up the expectation that students should read closely, to analyze the text.

On the other hand, the second teacher activates students’ background knowledge and provides students with a beginning framework to help them read closely and analyze the structure of the text. Neither of these teachers is choosing to do a “cold read,” but only one of them is setting students up to do a “close read.” Over time, the second teacher’s approach is much more likely to develop students with the capacity to “just start reading.”

The bottom line: “Cold reading” is an instructional approach, not a standard. Experiment with cold reading for the sake of building independence in your students, but there’s no need to toss out all your prereading activities that guide students in reading and analyzing complex texts.

**Myth #3: Answering text-dependent questions is what teaches students to be analytical readers.**

CHERYL: There’s lots of buzz right now about “text-dependent questioning” to help students meet ELA standards. Obviously, we want students to be able to demonstrate their comprehension by responding to questions that drive them back to the text for answers. But let’s not forget the steps that teach students how to answer text-dependent questions.

In many classrooms, teachers assign reading (“Read chapter 3 ...”) and assess reading (“and answer these questions”). The focus on text-dependent questions in the instructional shifts documents that accompany the core seems to affirm that approach. But these documents omit modeling and processing, which should come in between assigning and assessing.

We can invite students to the reading through purpose and show students how to read for that purpose through a think-aloud or other modeling strategy. Students read. They complete activities that demand they think about the text (graphic organizer, think-pair-share, or about a million other activities). And then, they demonstrate their understanding by answering text-dependent questions.

It’s the middle—the modeling and processing—where students actually get a clue as to how to be better readers. The questions tell us that they got there (or not).

**Myth #4: The common core abandons fiction.**

DINA: This is the myth most frequently circulating about the core. Here’s just one of the remarks I’ve heard: “Why do we have to shove nonfiction down their throats all of sudden?”

The heart of the complaint is understandable. It was voiced loud and clear by the National Council of Teachers of English in their comments on drafts of the common core and continues to be addressed elsewhere. However, the whole of the complaint as voiced above is not accurate.

To begin with, long before the common-core standards came on the scene, reading specialists like Harvey and Goudvis were already arguing that we have wandered too far from analytic, nonfiction reading and writing. And true, the core’s emphasis on rhetoric and logic was once standard in our schools.

Secondly, the common core does value creative and fictional reading and writing, no matter what provocateur and core author David Coleman says. It’s right there, a stand-alone, fully written standard, all the way through grade 12. The standards even recommend a full 50/50 split between fiction and nonfiction in the elementary grades, giving way to an 80/20 proportion in the secondary grades.

Bear in mind, as well, that the common core is clear that its recommendations span the reading expectations for all core subjects. As a result, it is not advocating for us ELA teachers to dump poetry and novels except for, say, two months out of the 10 in our school year. Rather, we’re encouraged to partner with our colleagues in a substantive way, and work together to help kids approach nonfiction texts with critical and active minds.

Admittedly, the common core does make some mystifying genre distinctions. All cre-

ative reading and writing is lumped under the “narrative” umbrella, implying it is always a description of logical, sequential events, usually personal. This is not only inaccurate (T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” anyone?), but arguably preferences a pragmatic, linear view of writing. Teachers will need to approach this particular facet of the core with the same critical thinking that the core itself advocates.

DINA AND CHERYL: We believe it’s important for educators to embrace the common-core standards, but to do so in a way that honors students’ needs and the wisdom of great teachers.

The standards are pushing us to examine our practices, and examine them we must. We must push ourselves in the same way we are being expected to push our students. We educators must thoughtfully read the complex common-core documents in their entirety, write rigorous lesson plans, and listen critically to those who are trying to help us learn and change.

Just as important is speaking up to question and clarify our own understanding of the standards and what they mean for our practice. We must keep “mythbusting” our own practices and what we are hearing so that the common-core standards can live up to their full potential. After all, the intention behind these rigorous standards—to prepare all students for careers and college—is at the heart of our work.

*Dina Strasser is a 7th grade English educator in upstate New York and a member of the Teacher Leaders Network. She is a former Fulbright Scholar, a National Writing Project Fellow, and writes The Line, cited by The Washington Post as one of the best education blogs of 2010.*

*Cheryl Dobbertin is the Director of NYS Common Core Curriculum and Professional Development for Expeditionary Learning, a national school reform organization. In addition, she consults with schools and teachers regarding implementation of differentiated instruction, adolescent literacy, and the Common Core Learning Standards. Cheryl is also an instructor in the teacher education program at Nazareth College of Rochester.*

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## COMMENTARY

# A Flawed Approach to Reading in the Common-Core Standards

By Joanne Yatvin

In reading the recently proposed Common Core State Standards already accepted by all but four states, I could not see many elementary school children of any background or ability meeting the standards at the grades designated. In my view, as a former elementary teacher and principal, the standards overestimate the intellectual, physiological, and emotional development of young children, asking them to think analytically as they read or write, extract subtle meanings from a text, and make fine distinctions within and across texts. Such deliberative and intensive behaviors are not supported by the research on child development, nor are they expected anywhere else in children's lives today.

Not long afterward, I read the accompanying document "Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy," prepared by the standards' primary authors, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, and became truly alarmed. In these instructions to curriculum developers and publishers of classroom materials, I saw not only a misreading of children's capabilities, but also the intent to redefine the purpose of K-12 education and to control its curriculum and methods.

The criteria document is divided into two sections; the first directed toward materials for grades K-2 and the second toward grades 3-12. Since it was impossible for me to separate out what was applicable to the elementary grades in the second section, I gave my primary attention to the first. Most of the quotations below come from the K-2 section, while a few later in the essay are from the introduction to the 3-12 section.

In the introduction to the criteria for grades K-2, the authors make clear that they are proposing a radical revision of the primary-grades curriculum. Here are some telling quotes:

*In kindergarten-grade 2, the most notable shifts in the standards when compared to state standards include a*

*focus on reading informational text and building a coherent knowledge within and across grades; a more in-depth approach to vocabulary development; and a requirement that students encounter sufficiently complex text through reading, writing, listening, and speaking.*

*By underscoring what matters most in the standards, the criteria illustrate what shifts must take place in the next generation of curricula, including paring away elements that distract from or are at odds with the Common Core State Standards.*

This is a pretty strong dose of academia for children just beginning their schooling, with not even a "spoonful of sugar to make the medicine go down." Most disturbing in these quotes, however, is the authors' demand that any content or skill not specified in the standards be excluded from the school curriculum.

For teaching reading in grades K-2, the criteria show a bias toward a particular philosophical approach that lays out a mechanical and linear pathway to reading competence:

*Materials that are aligned to the standards should provide explicit and systematic instruction and diagnostic support in concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, and fluency.*

*By the end of 2nd grade, a key goal should be that students are able to read independently with automaticity and flow to ensure that their focus can be freed for comprehension.*

Not only is this approach to reading more limited than what most experts recommend, it also excludes any early emphasis on understanding what one reads. Inexplicably, and in contradiction to research, the quotes imply that comprehension comes automatically and only after a child has mastered the mechanics of reading.

The criteria also insist on a focus on academic vocabulary and a way of teaching it that is, again, out of line with research and observations of young children's development.

*Of particular importance is building students' academic vocabulary or Tier 2 words.*

*It follows, then, that materials should require students to think about words: how and why specific words are used, how changing one word can change the meaning of text, how one word can have varied but related meanings based on context, and why another word might be more appropriate.*

For young children, the focus on academic vocabulary seems strange. At this time in their development, would it not be more sensible for children to learn words connected to their everyday lives and their interests rather than to things and experiences as yet unknown? Even stranger is the second quote that prescribes analytic thinking and word knowledge beyond the developmental level of children in grades K-2.

Next, the criteria reinforce the major curriculum feature in the standards: a significant increase in nonfiction materials at all grade levels.

*The standards call for elementary curriculum materials to be recalibrated to reflect a mix of 50 percent literary and 50 percent informational text, including reading in [English/language arts], science, social studies, and the arts.*

Apparently, the authors deem such a shift in curriculum content necessary for students to reach the goal of college and career readiness. But are their expectations for classroom practice realistic? The fact that fiction now dominates the elementary curriculum is not the result of educators' decisions about what is best for children, but a reflection of chil-



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children's developmental stages, their interests, and their limited experience in the fields of science, geography, history, and technology. It is one thing for a child to read *The Little Engine That Could* for the pleasure of the story and quite another for her to comprehend the inner workings of a locomotive.

Reading any text requires more than decoding, fluency, and inferring meaning from context; the reader must form mental images of things mentioned based on previous experience or imagination. Although illustrations in many nonfiction books help considerably, there is a limit to how many unfamiliar things can be adequately illustrated in a book for young children.

Ultimately, the authors show their contempt for teachers' competence, the use of supplementary materials, and children's experiences. In the first two quotes below—taken from the criteria for grades 3-12—and the third quote—taken from the K-2 document—this becomes apparent.

*The criteria make plain that developing students' prowess at drawing knowledge from the text itself is the point of teaching; teaching is not a substitute for the text.*

*In reading primary sources, students must learn that it is important to set aside their own prior knowledge to focus on the text itself.*

*That is, the text should be central, and surrounding materials should be included only when necessary, so as not to distract from the text itself.*

These quotes make clear the authors' conviction that commercial textbooks and curriculum programs should dominate classroom practice. Children are not to be distracted by anything the teacher explains or demonstrates or anything they've learned through their own reading or experiences. This is a narrow focus indeed, one that does not leave any room for teachers to use multiple sources or for students to think critically.

While I want to believe that the authors of the standards and the publishers' criteria did not intend to be as constrictive and authoritarian as their words indicate, I am aghast at the vision of the dreariness and harshness of the classrooms they aim to create. Taken together, the standards and the criteria project an aura of arrogance and ignorance in their assumptions about how and why children learn, what is actually needed to succeed in college or the workforce, and the extent of teachers' knowledge and expertise.

*Joanne Yatvin is a retired public school educator, a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, and a former member of the National Reading Panel. She now conducts independent research in high-poverty schools.*

*Published December 14, 2011, in Education Week*

## COMMENTARY

# Can Readers Really Stay Within the Standards Lines?

By Maja Wilson & Thomas Newkirk

**F**orty-six states and the District of Columbia have already signed on to the common-core standards, acting before the ink on them was even dry. But most of those states have done so without reading the small print, spelled out in the recently released guidelines for publishers and curriculum developers.

Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the document moves beyond the standards' generalities to lay out the view of reading at the heart of the common core and to specify practices that need to be in place to foster it. It is a consequential and revealing document that really shows us what we're being asked to buy.

At one level, we find some of what is in this document appealing and timely. We like the focus on deep sustained reading—and rereading. We like the idea of giving a central place to challenging texts that are not cluttered by distracting headnotes, sidenotes, and endnotes that give so many reading selections a *People* magazine look.

But we are distressed by the view of reading that will be enforced by standards-aligned textbooks, curriculum, and assessments. That view—that students should focus on the “text itself”—is an echo of slogans from the early and mid-1900s. The text, the guidelines say, should be understood on “its own terms,” and readers must fixate on “what lies within the four corners of the text.”

There is a distrust of reader response in this view; while the personal connections and judgments of the reader may enter in later, they should do so only after students demonstrate “a clear understanding of what they read.” Publish-

ers are enjoined to pose “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.” In case there is any question about how much focus on the text is enough, “80 to 90 percent of the Reading Standards in each grade require text-dependent analysis; accordingly, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text-dependent questions.”

This model of reading seems to have two stages—first, a close reading in which the reader withholds judgment or comparison with other texts, focusing solely on what is happening within the four corners of a piece. Only then may readers pay attention to prior knowledge and personal association or engage in interpretation and critique.

To understand our concern with this model, consider the ultimate stated goal of this close reading: “Student knowledge drawn from the text is demonstrated when the student uses evidence from the text to support a claim about the text.” While the virtues of a close reading are many, there is no guidance given in this document for how students will create the questions, hypotheses, or interpretations necessary to generate an interesting claim about a text. In fact, many of the activities useful for generating these claims are expressly limited: Students will not look outside the text, not make text-to-text connections until later, and only be asked for their “reader responses” once the claims of the text are firmly in their minds.

This readerly repression is unnatural, and probably impossible. Since you are obviously still reading this Commentary, you be the judge. Have you stayed within “the text itself”? Have you cordoned off

preconceptions, biases, prior reading, and associations until you finish and comprehend this text? Have you bracketed your own views about standards, reading, and what goes on in classrooms so that you can get our message? Or do words like “standards” and “reading” invoke your own teaching, learning, and reading histories? Could you suppress this invocation even if you wanted to? (If this list of questions annoys you, please wait until you fully comprehend our piece before being annoyed.)

Your own reading associations—the memory of a 7th grade English class in which the reading of every book was followed by creating a collage, or of the 10th grade teacher who showed you how to read Shakespeare—actually help you to locate yourself within the four corners of a text. To figure out what claim you’d like to make about our claim, you’d have to pay attention to these associations from the beginning.

To illustrate how our approach would differ from that proposed by these guidelines, imagine two ways of teaching Nicholas Carr’s 2008 essay from *The Atlantic*, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”—precisely the kind of demanding text the common-core standards advocate sharing with students.

Before assigning the essay, we would have students log their media use for a day (texts, emails, video games, TV, reading, surfing the Internet) and share this 24-hour profile with classmates. We might ask students to free-write and perhaps debate the question: “What advantages or disadvantages do you see in this pattern of media use?” This “gateway” activity would prepare students to think about Carr’s argument. As they read, they’d be mentally comparing their own position with Carr’s. Surely, we want them to understand Carr’s argument, but we’d help them do that by making use of their experiences and opinions.

In the classroom envisioned by the standards guidelines, these personal connections and opinions might be allowed later, after students have encountered and come to know Carr’s text “on its own terms.” Some preteaching would be allowed in the common-core classroom—as long as it didn’t distract from the text. So students might be presented with a list of vocabulary words in the article or maybe be given information about the genre being read. But as they read, their attention would be focused almost exclusively on Carr’s argument.

As we see it, these guidelines urge the use of difficult texts, but preclude the use of strategies that can help students situate texts in their own lives. All the instruction in the world won’t help a reader who has already decided that a text is distant and irrelevant. But helping students understand the text itself means helping students find themselves

in it. We worry that if textbooks, curriculum, and assessments align themselves to the view of reading in the common-core guidelines, students will become alienated from the very complex texts with which they will be required to grapple.

So, yes, we have to stress attention to the text and language. And, yes, building a diorama or making a collage is not always the best way to do that. And, for sure, bring on challenging texts. But going back to this sterile and humanly impossible view of reading is not the answer.

*Maja Wilson taught high school English for 10 years and currently teaches courses in literacy instruction at the University of Maine, in Orono. She is the author of Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment (Heinemann, 2006).*

*Thomas Newkirk is a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham, where he directs the New Hampshire Literacy Institutes. His most recent book is The Art of Slow Reading: Six Time-Honored Practices for Engagement (Heinemann, 2011).*

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<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards>

*David Coleman and Susan Pimentel*

Common Core State Standards Initiative, June 2011

**Student Achievement Partners: Guide to Text-Dependent Questions**

<http://www.achievethecore.org/steal-these-tools/text-dependent-questions>

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