

Activity 8 – Elements of Language

1. Read the following excerpt from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts – Appendix A.
2. List questions you have about the language of the language section
3. Discuss whether the progression described matches your district’s instructional practices and curriculum.

Language

Overview

The Standards take a hybrid approach to matters of conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary. As noted in the table below, certain elements important to reading, writing, and speaking and listening are included in those strands to help provide a coherent set of expectations for those modes of communication.

Elements of the Language Standards in the Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening Strands

Strand	Standard
Reading	R.CCR .4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
Writing	W.CCR .5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Speaking and Listening	SL.CCR .6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

In many respects, however, conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary extend across reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Many of the conventions-related standards are as appropriate to formal spoken English as they are to formal written English. Language choice is a matter of craft for both writers and speakers. New words and phrases are acquired not only through reading and being read to but also through direct vocabulary instruction and (particularly in the earliest grades) through purposeful classroom discussions around rich content.

The inclusion of Language standards in their own strand should not be taken as an indication that skills related to conventions, knowledge of language, and vocabulary are unimportant to reading, writing, speaking, and listening; indeed, they are inseparable from such contexts.

Conventions and Knowledge of Language

Teaching and Learning the Conventions of Standard English

Development of Grammatical Knowledge

Grammar and usage development in children and in adults rarely follows a linear path. Native speakers and language learners often begin making new errors and seem to lose their mastery of particular grammatical structures or print conventions as they learn new, more complex grammatical structures or new usages of English, such as in college-level persuasive essays. These errors are often signs of language development as learners synthesize new grammatical and usage knowledge with their current knowledge. Thus, students will often need to return to the same grammar topic in greater complexity as they move through K–12 schooling and as they increase the range and complexity of the texts and communicative contexts in which they read and write. The Standards account for the recursive, ongoing nature of grammatical knowledge in two ways. First, the Standards return to certain important language topics in higher grades at greater levels of sophistication. For instance, instruction on verbs in early elementary school (K–3) should address simple present, past, and future tenses; later instruction should extend students’ knowledge of verbs to other tenses (progressive and perfect tenses¹ in grades 4 and 5), mood (modal auxiliaries in grade 4 and grammatical mood in grade 8) and voice (active and passive voice in grade 8). Second, the Standards identify with an asterisk (*) certain skills and understandings that students are to be introduced to in basic ways at lower grades but that are likely in need of being retaught and relearned in subsequent grades as students’ writing and speaking matures and grows more complex. (See “Progressive Language Skills in the Standards,” on pages 5-6 of this section.)

Making Appropriate Grammar and Usage Choices in Writing and Speaking

Students must have a strong command of the grammar and usage of spoken and written standard English to succeed academically and professionally. Yet there is great variety in the language and grammar features of spoken and written standard English, of academic and everyday standard English, and of the language of different disciplines. Furthermore, in the twenty-first century, students must be able to communicate effectively in a wide range of print and digital texts, each of which may require different grammatical and usage choices to be effective. Thus, grammar and usage instruction should acknowledge the many varieties of English that exist and address differences in grammatical structure and usage between these varieties in order to help students make purposeful language choices in their writing and speaking. Students must also be taught the purposes for using particular grammatical features in particular disciplines or texts; if they are taught simply to vary their grammar and language to keep their writing “interesting,” they may actually become more confused about how to make effective language choices. The Standards encourage this sort of instruction in a number of ways, most directly through a series of grade-specific standards associated with Language CCR standard 3 that, beginning in grade 1, focuses on making students aware of language variety.

Using Knowledge of Grammar and Usage for Reading and Listening Comprehension

Grammatical knowledge can also aid reading comprehension and interpretation. Researchers recommend that students be taught to use knowledge of grammar and usage, as well as knowledge of vocabulary, to comprehend complex academic texts. At the elementary level, for example, students can use knowledge of verbs to help them understand the plot and characters in a text. At the secondary level, learning the grammatical structures of nonstandard dialects can help students understand how accomplished writers such as Harper Lee, Langston Hughes, and Mark Twain use various dialects of English to great advantage and effect, and can help students analyze setting, character, and author’s craft in great works of literature. Teaching about the grammatical patterns found in specific disciplines has also been shown to help English language learners’ reading comprehension in general and reading comprehension in history classrooms in particular.

As students learn more about the patterns of English grammar in different communicative contexts throughout their K–12 academic careers, they can develop more complex understandings of English grammar and usage. Students can use this understanding to make more purposeful and effective choices in their writing and speaking and more accurate and rich interpretations in their reading and listening.

Progressive Language Skills in the Standards

While all of the Standards are cumulative, certain Language skills and understandings are more likely than others to need to be retaught and relearned as students advance through the grades. Beginning in grade 3, the Standards note such “progressive” skills and understandings with an asterisk (*) in the main document; they are also summarized in the table on pages 29 and 55 of that document as well as on page 34 of Appendix A. These skills and understandings should be mastered at a basic level no later than the end of the grade in which they are introduced in the Standards. In subsequent grades, as their writing and speaking become more sophisticated, students will need to learn to apply these skills and understandings in more advanced ways.

The following example shows how one such task – ensuring subject-verb agreement, formally introduced in the Standards in grade 3 – can become more challenging as students’ writing matures. The sentences in the table on the following page are taken verbatim from the annotated writing samples found in Appendix C. The example is illustrative only of a general development of sophistication and not meant to be exhaustive, to set firm grade-specific expectations, or to establish a precise hierarchy of increasing difficulty in subject-verb agreement.

Example of Subject-Verb Agreement Progression across Grades

Example	Condition
<i>Horses are so beautiful and fun to ride.</i> [Horses, grade 3]	Subject and verb next to each other
<i>When I started out the door, I noticed that Tigger and Max were following me to school.</i> [Glowing Shoes, grade 4]	Compound subject joined by and
<i>A mother or female horse is called a mare.</i> [Horses, grade 3]	Compound subject joined by or; each subject takes a singular verb ²
<i>The first thing to do is research, research, research!</i> [Zoo Field Trip, grade 4]	Intervening phrase between subject and verb
<i>If the watershed for the pools is changed, the condition of the pools changes.</i> [A Geographical Report, grade 7]	Intervening phrase between each subject and verb suggesting a different number for the verb than the subject calls for
<i>Another was the way to the other evil places.</i> [Getting Shot and Living Through It, grade 5] <i>All his stories are the same type.</i> [Author Response: Roald Dahl, grade 5] <i>All the characters that Roald Dahl ever made were probably fake characters.</i> [Author Response: Roald Dahl, grade 5] <i>One of the reasons why my cat Gus is the best pet is because he is a cuddle bug.</i> [A Pet Story About My Cat . . . Gus, grade 6]	Indefinite pronoun as subject, with increasing distance between subject and verb

Language and Progressive Skills, by Grade

The following standards, marked with an asterisk (*) in the main Standards document, are particularly likely to require continued attention in higher grades as they are applied to increasingly sophisticated writing and speaking.

Standard	Grade(s)							
	1	4	5	6	7	8	9-10	11-12
L.3.1f. Ensure subject-verb and pronoun antecedent agreement.								
L.3.3a. Choose words and phrases for effect.								
L.4.1f. Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.								
L.4.1g. Correctly use frequently confused words (e.g., <i>to/too/two</i> ; <i>there/their</i>).								
L.4.3a. Choose words and phrases to convey ideas precisely.*								
L.4.3b. Choose punctuation for effect.								
L.5.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb tense.								
L.5.2a. Use punctuation to separate items in a series.†								
L.6.1c. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in pronoun number and person.								
L.6.1d. Recognize and correct vague pronouns (i.e., ones with unclear or ambiguous antecedents).								
L.6.1e. Recognize variations from standard English in their own and others' writing and speaking, and identify and use strategies to improve expression in conventional language.								
L.6.2a. Use punctuation (commas, parentheses, dashes) to set off nonrestrictive/parenthetical elements.								

Standard	Grade(s)							
	1	4	5	6	7	8	9-10	11-12
L.6.3a. Vary sentence patterns for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.‡								
L.6.3b. Maintain consistency in style and tone.								
L.7.1c. Place phrases and clauses within a sentence, recognizing and correcting misplaced and dangling modifiers.								
L.7.3a. Choose language that expresses ideas precisely and concisely, recognizing and eliminating wordiness and redundancy.								
L.8.1d. Recognize and correct inappropriate shifts in verb voice and mood.								
L.9–10.1a. Use parallel structure.								

* Subsumed by L.7.3a

† Subsumed by L.9–10.1a

‡ Subsumed by L.11–12.3a

¹ Though progressive and perfect are more correctly aspects of verbs rather than tenses, the Standards use the more familiar notion here and throughout for the sake of accessibility.

² In this particular example, *or female horse* should have been punctuated by the student as a nonrestrictive appositive, but the sentence as is illustrates the notion of a compound subject joined by *or*.