

Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades K–2

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INTRODUCTION

Developed by the authors of the Common Core State Standards, these criteria are designed to guide publishers and curriculum developers as they work to ensure alignment with the Common Core State Standards in developing reading materials for the early grades.

The criteria articulated below concentrate on the most significant elements of the Common Core State Standards for literacy in kindergarten through 2nd grade and lay out their implications for aligning materials with the standards. They are intended to direct curriculum developers and publishers to be purposeful and strategic in both what to include and what to exclude in instructional material. 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 or are at odds with the Common Core State Standards. These guidelines are not meant to dictate classroom practice but rather to ensure that teachers receive effective tools.

At the heart of these criteria is the belief that reading — in this case, learning to read — is central. In the early grades, the focus must be on learning to read with facility. But materials for even the youngest readers need to keep the text central, along with regular reminders that the purpose of reading is to be informed by it. The goal for readers of all ages should always be to understand what they read and to express that understanding through speaking and writing about text. Encouraging this expectation from the start is vital to developing purposeful readers who expect what they read to make sense to them.

DOCUMENT ORGANIZATION

This document has three parts: The first articulates criteria that should guide the development of English language arts (ELA) and literacy materials in grades K–2, the second details the criteria that should guide the teaching of reading foundations, and the third outlines a set of practices that follow from observing those criteria.

- I. Key Criteria for ELA and Literacy Materials**
- II. Key Criteria for Reading Foundations**
- III. Building Instructional Materials: Principles into Practice**

I. Key Criteria for ELA and Literacy Materials

The Common Core State Standards point strongly toward a text-based approach for teaching students how to read, including those students who lag behind in achieving reading facility. To bring all students up to grade level reading proficiency, the criteria recommended below emphasize the need for offering differing degrees of repetition of core practices so all young readers can build a strong reading foundation.

1. ***Texts for each grade align with the complexity requirements outlined in the standards.*** The Common Core State Standards hinge on students encountering appropriately complex texts at each grade level to develop the mature language skills and the conceptual knowledge they need for success in school and life. In each grade (beginning in grade 1), Reading Standard 10 outlines the level of text complexity at which students need to demonstrate comprehension. This can start in kindergarten or even earlier with complex texts read aloud to students. (Appendix A in the Common Core Standards gives further information on how text complexity can be measured.)¹ Research makes clear that the complexity levels of the texts students are presently required to read throughout their school careers are significantly below what is required to achieve college and career readiness. Far too often, students who have fallen behind are given only less complex texts rather than the support they need to read texts at the appropriate level of complexity.
2. ***All students, including those who are behind, have extensive opportunities to encounter and comprehend grade-level complex text as required by the standards.*** Complex text, whether accessed through read-alouds or as a group reading activity, is a rich repository all readers need access to. Complex text contains more sophisticated academic vocabulary, lends itself to more complex tasks, and is able to support rich dialogue. Because students at these grades can listen to much more complex material than they can read themselves, read-aloud selections should be provided for the teachers in the core curriculum materials.

Curriculum materials must provide extensive opportunities for all students to engage with complex text as a member of a class, although students whose decoding ability is developing at a slower rate may also need extra assistance. This assistance could include fluency practice, vocabulary building, and supplementary practice with texts from the previous grade. Students who need additional assistance, however, must not miss out on essential practice and instruction their classmates are receiving to help them think deeply about texts and gain world and word knowledge. Therefore, remedial materials must be flexible and straightforward enough to be used in alternative settings and times: before and after school, at home, or in after-school programs. In most cases, the persons working with students in such settings will not have as much experience as the primary classroom teachers, and materials must accommodate that fact.

3. ***Text selections are worth reading and re-reading.*** The standards maintain that high-quality text selections should be consistently offered to students because they will encourage students and teachers to spend more time on them than they would on low-quality material. Texts selected for inclusion should be

¹ A working group is developing clear, common standards for measuring text complexity that can be consistent across different curricula and publishers. These criteria, due out in summer 2011, will blend quantitative and qualitative factors and will be widely shared and made available to publishers and curriculum developers. It is likely that the measurement of some narrative fiction as well as poetry and drama for the time being will have to depend largely on qualitative judgments that are based on the principles laid out in Appendix A and are being further developed and refined.

well written and, if called for, richly illustrated. This principle applies equally to texts intended for reading aloud and texts for students to read by themselves. (For samples of appropriate quality of selection, see Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards.)

Selections in the early elementary grades must also contain sufficient repetitions of high-frequency words and spelling/sound correspondences. Some of this repetition can come through explicit instruction to read texts multiple times. To be sufficient, materials should provide abundant—and easily available—opportunities for repetition to ensure that all students can transfer knowledge of spelling/sound patterns to words not previously seen or studied.

4. **Materials include a greater volume of informational text.** The Common Core State Standards call for a much greater emphasis on informational text. Specifically, they call for elementary curriculum materials to be recalibrated to reflect a mix of 50 percent informational and 50 percent narrative text. (See p. 31 of the standards for details on how these two types of texts are defined.) Achieving the appropriate balance between literary and informational text in the next generation of materials requires a significant shift in early literacy materials and instructional time so that equal time and weight are given to scientific and historical text and to literary text. In addition, to develop reading comprehension and vocabulary for *all* readers, the selected informational text materials should build a coherent body of knowledge within and across grades. (The example of “The Human Body” on p. 33 of the Common Core State Standards offers one approach.)
5. **Materials develop academic vocabulary prevalent in complex texts throughout reading, writing, listening, and speaking instruction.** Some students who enter school behind their peers will have smaller vocabulary bases of common Tier 1 and Tier 2 words.² Materials must address this vocabulary gap early and aggressively, or it will expand and accelerate. This means materials must provide opportunities — both in and out of classroom contexts — for instruction that is driven by the diverse vocabulary levels of children, including providing more instruction for students with weaker vocabularies rather than offering them fewer words than their peers.

Of particular importance is building students’ academic vocabulary or Tier 2 words. Aligned materials should guide students to gather as much information as they can about the meaning of these words from the context of how the words are being used in the text, while offering support for vocabulary when students are not likely to be able to figure out their meanings from the text alone. As the meanings of words vary with the context, the more varied the context provided to teach the meaning of a word is, the more effective the results will be. 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 a text, how one word can have varied but related meanings based on context, and why another word might be more appropriate. While instruction should be systematic and varied (i.e., multiple word meanings, morphology, phonology, and orthography), materials should also use games, jokes, puns, and other forms of word play to enhance instruction and develop a sense of excitement about words.

² Academic vocabulary (described in more detail as Tier 2 words in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards) includes those words that readers will find in all types of complex texts from different disciplines and can be abstract in meaning so that instructional time is merited.

6. **Questions are grounded in the text and are worth thinking about and answering.** Materials that accompany texts should ask students to think about what they have heard or read and then ask them to draw evidence from the text in support of their ideas about the reading. The standards strongly suggest that a majority of questions posed to children be based on the text under consideration. (This is equally true of read-alouds students listen to as it is of material students read for themselves.) A good answer therefore will require thinking about the text carefully and finding evidence in the text. It will not rely on students' different knowledge backgrounds and the experiences they bring with them to school. Discussions tasks, activities, and questions following readings should draw on a full range of insights and knowledge contained in the text in terms of both content and language. Questions and tasks should integrate reading and writing wherever possible.
7. **Additional materials markedly increase the opportunity for regular independent reading of texts that appeal to students' interests to develop both their knowledge and joy in reading.** These materials should ensure that all students have daily opportunities to read texts of their choice on their own during and outside of the school day. Students should have access to a wide range of materials on a variety of topics and genres. These texts should enable students to read broadly to build their knowledge, vocabulary, and experience. Materials will need to include texts at students' own reading level as well as texts with complexity levels that will challenge and motivate students. In alignment with the standards and to acknowledge the range of students' interests, these materials should include informational texts as well as literature.

II. Key Criteria for Reading Foundations

In addition to the recommendations offered above regarding the selection and framing of texts, the Common Core State Standards offer specific guidance on reading foundations that should be observed in curriculum materials to prepare students to be college and career ready. They articulate a well-developed set of skills and habits that taken collectively lay the foundation for students to achieve competence in reading comprehension. (See pp. 15–16 of the Common Core State Standards for more detail.) To be in position to read appropriately challenging text throughout school, all students need to be decoding automatically and reading with fluency by the time they finish 2nd grade.

1. **Materials must meet the needs of a wide range of students, reinforcing key lessons while being easy to access and understand.** Students come to school unevenly prepared, so materials must have the capacity to meet a range of needs. Core materials need to incorporate *much* more practice opportunities for all aspects of foundational reading. In particular, it is important that learning about print concepts proceeds in parallel with the development of phonological awareness. Students also need to achieve automaticity with the sound/symbol relationships, high-frequency words with spelling/sound correspondences, and high-frequency irregular words with the goal of students achieving these skills by the end of first grade. Materials need to provide repeated, regularly spaced practice in these foundational skills without depriving any students of full access to rich complex text.
2. **Fluency should be a particular focus of materials prepared for 2nd graders.** By the end of 2nd grade, it is essential that students be able to read with automaticity and flow to ensure that their focus can be freed for comprehension.

Materials should provide students who need it with repeated readings and opportunities to follow along while text is read aloud to achieve fluency. Materials should also provide ample opportunities for repeated oral reading (in and out of the classroom) with a variety of grade-level texts that can be easily implemented, including providing a framework and tools for assessing oral reading accuracy, rate, and expression with a variety of text types. Fluency instruction must explicitly direct students to adjust their rate so it is appropriate to the type of text being read. Specifically, informational text should be read more slowly than narratives as they are denser with information that could easily be missed.

III. Building Instructional Materials: Principles into Practice

Curriculum materials should assist teachers and students in staying focused on the primary goals of instruction: developing proficient decoders and fluent readers. The aim is for students to understand that thinking and reading occur simultaneously. Existing curricula will need to be revised substantially to focus classroom time on practicing reading, writing, speaking, and listening in direct response to high-quality text. The design of materials is crucial to achieving this goal, and care should be given to not only how to logically and efficiently present the criteria outlined above but also what to omit that would otherwise distract from achieving the goals noted above.

1. **Reading selections are the central focus of the materials.** The reading selections in either the teachers' guides or the students' editions of curriculum materials should be easily found and put at the center of the layout. The text should be the clear focus of student and teacher attention. Surrounding materials should be thoughtfully considered and justified as essential before being included. 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.
2. **Reading strategies are not offered as a separate body of material.** Far too much of existing curriculum focuses on either decontextualized strategies or preloading instructions for reading. Rather than being consigned to the margins when completing assignments, close and careful reading must be at the heart of classroom activities. Reading strategies must take their rightful place *in service* of reading comprehension, not as a separate body of material. They are a tool for — not the point of — reading instruction. Appropriate strategies should be introduced only when they help clarify a specific part of a text and are dictated by specific features of a text (especially to assist with understanding more challenging sections). Over time, students will learn to internalize the purpose of reading strategies in pursuit of the ultimate goal: helping them understand what they have read. With a steady diet of reading sufficiently rich and appropriately complex text, the most valuable among the strategies will naturally be called upon and practiced.
3. **Prereading activities are eliminated or sharply curtailed.** Students' initial exposure to text should be with the text itself. Scaffolding, summaries, stimulant questions, connecting the reader to the text ahead of time, and the like 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. All of these distract the reader from the central act of reading — of engaging with the text and trying to make meaning for himself or herself. These previews also send the unintended message that the text is not good enough to demand one's attention without preview or stimulus. Information previously provided by prereading activities should be gleaned from multiple readings of the text. Accordingly,

aligned curriculum should explicitly direct students to re-read challenging portions of the text. This is equally true for material read aloud to students or texts that students access on their own. Follow-up support should guide readers in the use of appropriate strategies and habits when encountering places in the text where they might struggle, including pointing students back to the text with teacher support when they are confused or run into vocabulary problems. Extra textual scaffolding prior to and during the first read should focus on words that are essential to a basic understanding and that students are not likely to know. As a preferred option for read-alouds, teachers should be directed to read aloud materials themselves, rather than listening along with their students to the text read by a recorded voice. In short, prereading activities should be minimized so that the text itself is the focus of the instruction and children are able to appreciate and get a sense of the story as a whole.

4. ***Broad themes are used sparingly, with more focus on specific texts and topics.*** Instructional units organized around broad, abstract themes like “traditions” or “our changing world” — the norm in current materials for younger readers — are hard to develop and even harder for students to grasp. Such broad questions tend to distract from the specifics of each text and pigeonhole specific works. They invite teachers and readers to have abstract and general conversations rather than focusing reading on drawing evidence from the text and gleaning meaning from it. A more productive organizing idea can be a shared topic to ensure that students build knowledge as they read. Especially critical for students who bring less background knowledge from home, these topics will “level the playing field” because all students will have equal access to the ideas available in the text.
5. ***Activities are tied explicitly to the text being read.*** Given the focus of the Common Core State Standards, publishers should be extremely sparing in offering activities that are not text based. Instructional support materials should focus on posing questions that help students become interested in the text, rather than on trying to cajole or entertain students as a prerequisite for asking them to engage with the text.
6. ***Materials stress practicing the skills identified in the principles articulated above.*** Core materials need to provide repeated, regularly spaced exposure and practice opportunities for all aspects of reading. This should include practice for the full range of foundational skills in and out of classroom settings through take-home or after-school activities. Because students differ widely in how much exposure and repetition they need to master foundational skills, materials also need to incorporate high-quality parallel activities for those students who are able to reach facility with less repetition. Approaching remediation and extension activities in this parallel way will help teachers resolve one of the central dilemmas of the early elementary classroom — meeting the needs of all learners.
7. ***Materials offer assessment opportunities that genuinely measure progress.*** Activities used for assessment should clearly denote what standards are being emphasized, and materials should offer frequent and easily implemented assessments, including systems for record keeping and follow-up. These should include a framework and tools for assessing oral reading accuracy, rate, and expression with a variety of text types when it is fluency that is being measured.

CONCLUSION: TRANSPARENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE BASE

Curriculum materials must have a clear and documented research base. This evidence should be offered to the teacher in clear, concise prose at appropriate points in the instructional materials (e.g., when vowel digraphs are being taught, a “best practices” discussion could be offered to the teacher; when fluency activities are introduced, the research base for fluency’s role in reading proficiency and how to achieve fluency in students could be presented to instructors). In all materials, principles of reading acquisition are explained, instructions to teachers and students are clear and concise, and the relationship between tasks and the expected learning outcome is clear and placed in close proximity to the task directions.

Curriculum offered as an excellent match for the Common Core State Standards should produce evidence of its usability and efficacy with a full range of students, including English language learners.