

Understanding the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

By Karen K. Wixson, Ph.D.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), like most academic content standards, are designed to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn. They are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. The concept of college and career readiness is a driving force behind the CCSS. College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards for the end of 12th grade were developed first. The CCR standards then served as the basis for the development of the K–12 standards, which are intended to function as learning progressions that lead to achievement of the CCR standards.

The development of the CCSS was led by the states, not a federal agency, under the auspices of the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). As a state-led initiative, the CCSS are designed to improve on current state standards by creating fewer, clearer, and higher-level standards. The CCSS are also internationally benchmarked to help ensure that all students are prepared to succeed in a global economy and society.

It is also worth noting that the CCSS are not intended to define all that can or should be taught; the standards are not intended to be a curriculum. Rather, they are intended to provide guidance on the core content needed for curriculum development. Neither are the CCSS intended to define how teachers should teach, the nature of advanced work beyond the core, or the interventions needed for students reading and writing well below grade level. Finally, they do not define the full range of support for English language learners and students with special needs.

There are, of course, many reasons for the widespread support for the development and implementation of common standards at this point in state and national efforts to improve education. Perhaps the most compelling is ample, strong evidence of the inequities created by the tremendous variability observed in policies and procedures related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment across states. Among the areas in which it has been demonstrated that states vary widely are the content and quality of state standards, the alignment of state standards with the assessments used to measure student achievement, the quality of these assessments and the criteria used for determining “proficiency,” and, ultimately, the alignment of state standards, assessments, and the “delivered” curriculum. Other factors that are frequently



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mentioned as good reasons for having common standards include student mobility and the need to prepare students for a different world of work in today’s global society—hence, the attention to college and career readiness.

The CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA)

Let’s start with the title *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. The specification of subject areas in the title of the ELA standards is the first indication that these standards are different from most state standards in the areas of the English language arts.

The CCSS for ELA provide an integrated view of the areas within the English language arts: reading, writing, speaking/listening, and language. This integrated view further encompasses attention to reading and writing both literature and informational text at K–5. The 6–12 standards are first organized by ELA and then subject areas to distinguish which standards are the responsibility of the English language arts teacher and which are to be addressed by subject area teachers. Within ELA, the organization is similar to that of the K–5 standards—that is, all four areas of the language arts, with reading broken down by literature and informational text and writing to include composition of argument (opinion pieces and support for claims), informative/explanatory text, and narrative. In contrast, the subject area sections address only reading and writing, and these areas are separated according to history/social studies and science/technical subjects.

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The integrated view of English language arts presented by the CCSS contrasts sharply with the heavy emphasis that has been placed on *reading* in recent years, almost to the exclusion of other areas of the language arts and other subject areas in the K–12 curriculum. When reading is part of an integrated model, the emphasis changes dramatically from the “big 5” of reading that have dominated curriculum and instruction for the last decade or more: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Within the CCSS for ELA, phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency are addressed primarily in the “Reading Foundational Skills” addendum to the K-5 standards. Vocabulary is highlighted in the Language strand, and comprehension is emphasized throughout the ELA standards. Add to this the emphasis on reading and writing in the disciplines at 6–12, and we are likely to see a major shift from an overemphasis on decoding toward improved comprehension of oral and written language, and learning with and from the language.

The CCSS for ELA document does not define literacy, reading, or English language arts directly—but it does provide some relevant insights about the fundamental nature of reading and literacy. The closest thing to definitions are statements about the “vision” of what it means to be literate in the 21st century (*Common Core State Standards for ELA*, p. 3) and a “portrait” of what students who are college and career ready in ELA “look like” (p. 7).

Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print

and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. (p. 3)

Designers of the standards often refer to this kind of reading as *reading like a detective*, where the emphasis is on close attention to the textual information in order to piece together a coherent account of what the text means. The portrait of students who meet the standards includes several attributes commonly identified as good reading habits—attributes such as (a) demonstrating independence, (b) building strong content knowledge, (c) responding to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline, (d) comprehending as well as critiquing, (e) valuing evidence, (f) using technology and digital media, and (g) understanding other perspectives and cultures (p. 7).

Another feature that distinguishes the CCSS for ELA from many state standards is that they do not directly address “processes”—cognitive abilities, motivation, or experience. In fact, the CCSS studiously avoid the use of terms such as strategies and processes. The stance on strategies/processes is that they are instrumental tools, the means by which teachers help students achieve the college and career readiness goals of the standards. The Common Core State Standards offer teachers wide latitude in deciding which to emphasize.

By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Thus, the Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards. (p. 4)

The Design of the ELA Standards

The CCSS for ELA document is meant to be read as an integrated ELA framework beginning with College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards within each strand—reading, writing, listening/speaking, and language. As mentioned previously, the grade-level standards are derived from the CCR anchor standards. The organization of the Common Core State Standards for ELA, Grades K–5, is presented in Figure 1, with the organization for Grades 6–12 shown in Figure 2. These figures make it clear that the grade-level standards are embedded within the context of the CCR anchor standards as well as the CCSS ELA appendices. More specifically, the **Reading** standards must be read in the context of the text complexity information in Appendix A and the exemplary texts in Appendix B. The **Writing** standards should be read along with samples in Appendix C, which illustrate performance criteria for each genre, grade by grade. The **Language** standards need to be read with the skills ladder in Appendix A, which illustrates when skills should be introduced and mastered. As a result of this complexity, a standard “alignment” exercise should take into account not just the grade-level standards alone, but also how the appendices help define these standards.

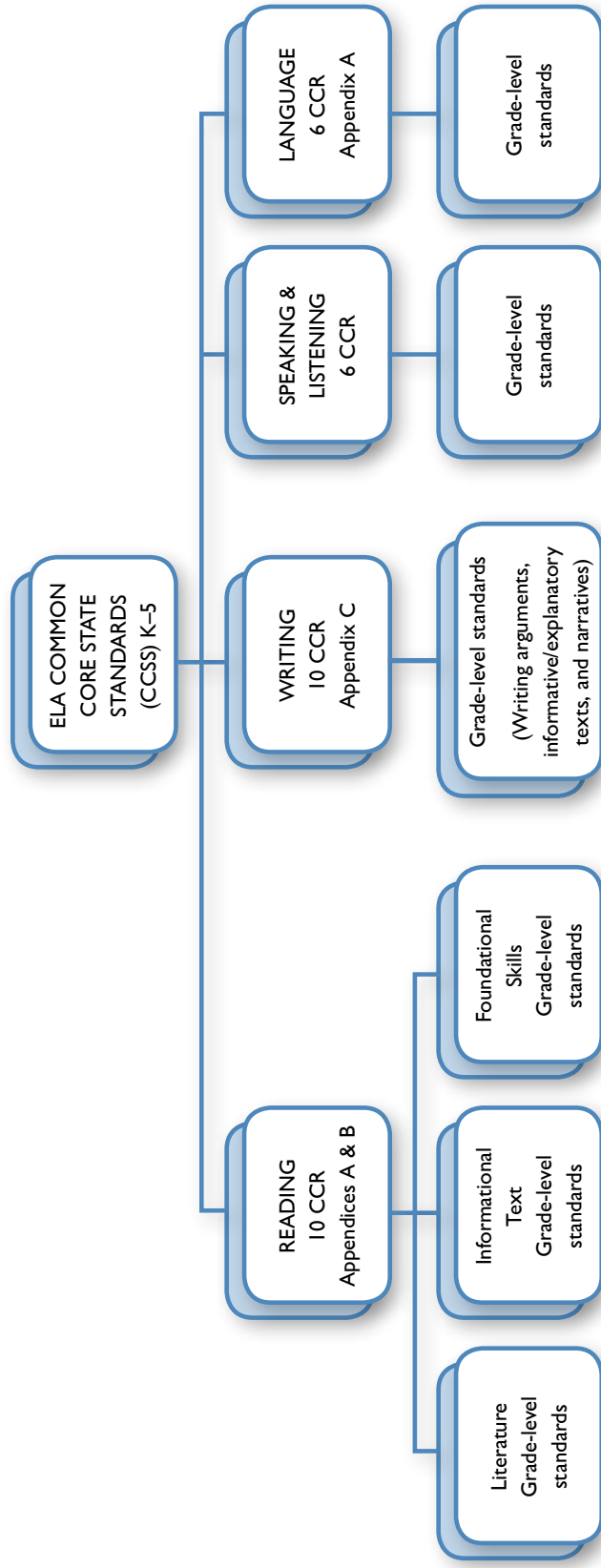


Figure 1. Outline of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, Grades K–5
 CCR = College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards
 Appendix A elaborates on text complexity, reading foundational skills, and skill progression in language. Appendix B provides sample reading texts and performance tasks. Appendix C provides samples of quality writing. (Diagram designed by Karen K. Wixson, Ph.D.)

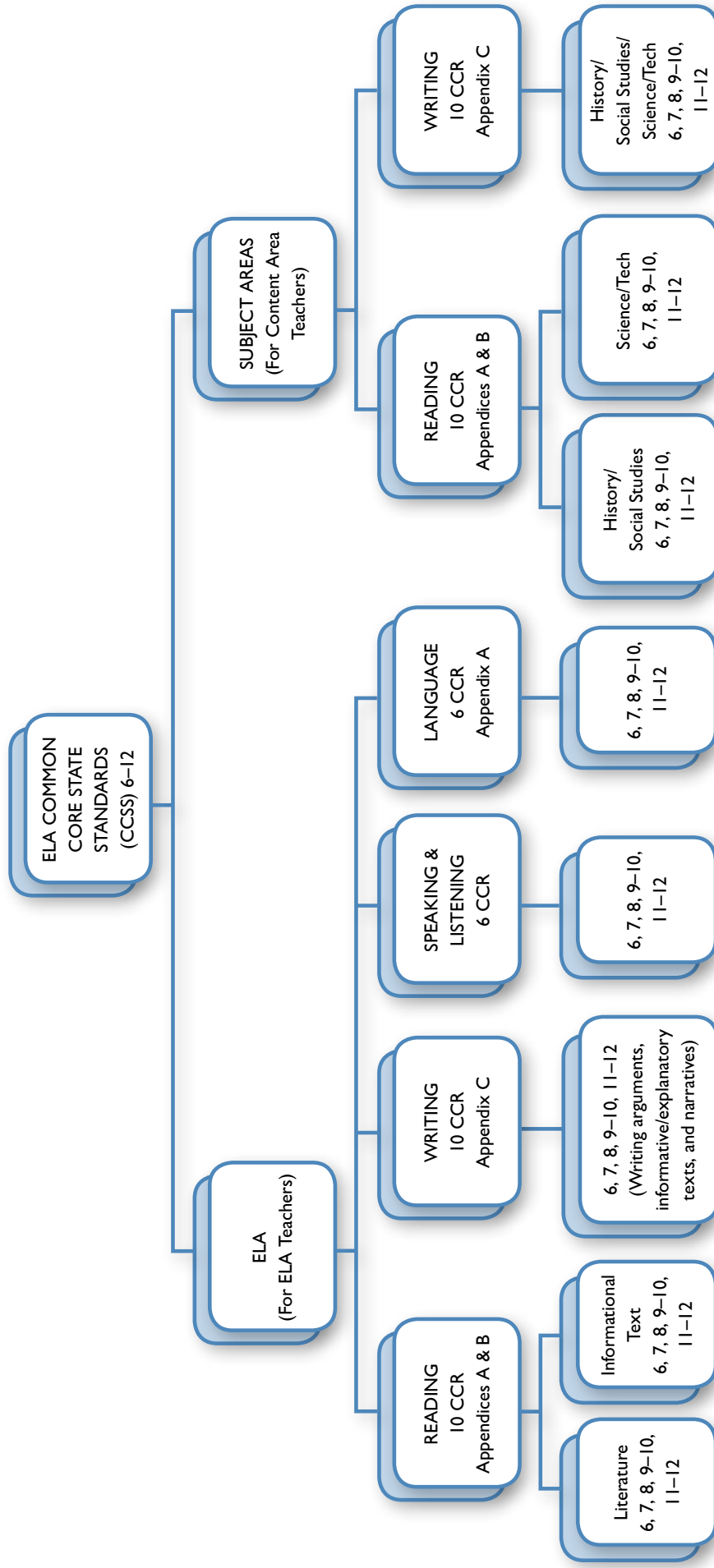


Figure 2. Outline of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, Grades 6-12

CCR = College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards

Appendix A elaborates on text complexity, reading foundational skills, and skill progression in language. Appendix B provides sample reading texts and performance tasks. Appendix C provides samples of quality writing. (Diagram designed by Karen K. Wixson, Ph.D.)

Highlights of the ELA Standards

Reading—The Reading strand has ten College and Career Readiness Standards grouped according to these four principles:

- Key Ideas and Details
- Craft and Structure
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas
- Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

These CCR standards are the basis for the grade-level standards, which are also broken down by literature and informational texts. The CCR standard that addresses the “Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity” derives from concerns that today’s high school graduates are not prepared to read the materials they encounter in college or in the workplace, either in terms of their knowledge base or their ability to successfully engage with complex texts. As a result, the ELA document provides information about the factors that influence text complexity in Appendix A and exemplar texts at different grade levels in Appendix B. The exemplar texts are not intended to serve as a required reading list. However, the CCSS do require certain specific types of reading content for all students, including foundational U.S. documents. Although this requirement is not actually embedded in the grade-level standards until high school, it does have implications for the types of materials students need to be reading in the elementary grades. These requirements are borne from the perspective of the CCSS for ELA: that content knowledge is an essential component of advanced reading ability.

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. Students also acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success. (p. 10)

Writing—As with the Reading strand, the Writing strand also has ten College and Career Readiness Standards. In the case of Writing, they are grouped according to these four principles:

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

These CCR standards are the basis for the grade-level standards, which include writing of argument (opinion pieces and support for claims), informative/explanatory text, and narrative. The CCR standards for Writing that address “Research to Build and Present Knowledge” focus on students’ learning to engage in significant amounts of research and writing about the sources they are using. The CCR standards for Writing place a strong emphasis on students writing arguments and informative/explanatory texts *across the curriculum*. This emphasis begins right at the kindergarten level with students learning to write “opinion” pieces.

Speaking/Listening—The Speaking and Listening strand has six College and Career Readiness standards grouped according to two principles:

- Comprehension and Collaboration
- Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

As with all of the strands, these CCR standards are the basis for the grade-level standards. These CCR standards focus on academic discussion in individual, small group, and whole class settings, along with an emphasis on formal presentations that include the use of technology.

Language—The Language strand also has six College and Career Readiness standards, grouped according to three principles:

- Conventions of Standard English
- Knowledge of Language
- Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

As before, the CCR standards then serve as the basis for the grade-level standards. The CCR standards addressing “Vocabulary Acquisition and Use” focus on the acquisition of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.

CCSS: Just the First Step

It bears repeating that, while rigorous standards are essential for increased equity and excellence, by themselves they are insufficient for achieving these goals. Educators must be provided with *professional development, resources, and time* to adjust classroom practice. *Curricula and instructional materials* need to be aligned with the standards in substantive ways. *Assessments* must be developed that inform curriculum and instruction, as well as measure student progress. Moreover, federal, state, and district *policies* will need to be reexamined to ensure they support alignment of the CCSS with student achievement.

At the time of this writing, 46 states and the District of Columbia have joined together to form two assessment consortia—the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership Assessment for College and Career Readiness (PARCC). New assessments are slated to be ready in 2014 to 2015 and are expected to consist of multiple types of summative, interim, and formative measures that take advantage of innovations made possible by computer adaptive assessment.

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Summing Up

Now that we've focused on specific aspects of the CCSS for English Language Arts, let's return to the integrated view of ELA that underlies its specific components. As noted in the document, "While the Standards delineate specific expectations in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, each standard need not be a separate focus for instruction and assessment. Often, several standards can be addressed by a single rich task." (p. 5). We educators currently find ourselves in a time when there are more standards, such as detailed state curricular requirements, than we can possibly address in our instruction. If the CCSS for ELA are implemented as intended, there should be increased opportunities to integrate ELA skills and processes with subject matter content, which should work to the benefit of both teachers and students.

Resources

Visit the official website to download the Standards and find many resources:

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010.

www.corestandards.org (Downloaded June 14, 2011)

Curriculum maps:

Common Core Curriculum Maps. Common Core, Inc. (private organization, not affiliated with the developers of the Common Core State Standards), 2011.

www.commoncore.org (Downloaded June 14, 2011)

Information on assessments:

Common State Assessments. Educational Testing Service, 2011.

<http://www.ets.org/k12/commonassessments> (Downloaded June 14, 2011)

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