Literacy and the Common Core State Standards

Although specific content standards exist for Mathematics and English/Language Arts, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) literacy standards flow through nearly every course, in every subject, from grades K through 12. The literacy standards “lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century” (Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI), 2010). They do not replace the content standards in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects; rather, they ask all teachers to bring literacy skills to the forefront of their classroom practice.

Many people—educators and non-educators alike—assume that the term literacy refers to basic reading skills, and in the past, that has often been a common understanding of the term. However, the Common Core State Standards expand the idea of literacy as a tool for achieving critical thinking and creative problem solving. They emphasize the integrated nature of thinking and communication, as embodied through four strands:

- reading
- writing
- speaking and listening
- language

The skills embodied in these strands enable students to be careful, reflective, critical thinkers who are prepared for college and careers. Students should write and speak about what they read or research. They should do so in all of their courses, and they should do so often. These components of literacy are natural processes that support
and feed off one another, enriching students' ability to creatively and purposefully express themselves through language.

In his book *Understanding Common Core State Standards* (2011), John Kendall explains that “the Common Core standards recognize that students read and write in different ways for different content areas….According to the Common Core, students must gain literacy skills specific to a variety of disciplines to be college- and career-ready, and teaching and assessing those skills is the responsibility of a variety of subject-area teachers” (p. 20).

As such, “students who meet the literacy 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” (CCSSI, p. 3).

**The Structure of the Standards**

Literacy cannot be “owned” entirely by the English teacher. True literacy must be cross-disciplinary. To be ready for college and careers and to function in the 21st century, students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language in all of the content areas, which means that literacy must be the responsibility of *all teachers of all grades and subject areas*. As a result, the CCSS are designed “not only for English language arts (ELA) but also for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects” (CCSSI, 2010, p. 3).

Understanding how the CCSS handle both ELA-specific standards and literacy standards means looking at the structure of the standards themselves. To begin, there are two categories of standards in the ELA/Literacy document:
- College and career readiness anchor standards
- Grade-specific standards

As you will soon see, the two categories of standards cannot be separated—one informs the other. However, it is easier to understand the structure of the standards if we start with the anchor standards.

The Anchor Standards

The anchor standards describe the core skills and competencies students should be developing throughout their school years. The standards are broadly stated so as to be applicable in all grade levels. For example, one of the reading anchor standards states that a student will “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.”

The anchor standards are grouped according to the four strands discussed earlier: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. The following table explains the core concepts behind each of the strands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards Strand</th>
<th>Based on the Standards…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>…students read increasingly complex texts as well as a wide array of literature, informational texts, and media. Students develop the ability to make discernments as they read and make connections between texts, find textual evidence, and note inconsistencies or poor reasoning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>…students write a variety of texts, with special emphasis on developing logical arguments with appropriate supporting evidence. Students respond in writing to their own reading, and they perform research and critical analysis of their findings.</td>
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### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards Strand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaking and Listening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...students discuss, evaluate, analyze, and critique their ideas in small and large groups. Students also evaluate and present information through speech and various types of media.</td>
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| Language | ...students develop their vocabularies and use formal English in their speaking and writing. They make sound and deliberate word choices to craft their expression. Vocabulary and convention development are woven into reading, writing, and speaking and listening. |

Within each strand, the standards are further organized into topics areas or groups, such as “Key Ideas and Details” or “Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity.” For example, here’s how the CCSS organize the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, with the topic areas in the blue boxes and the standards numbered beneath.

### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

#### Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

#### Craft and Structure

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

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

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

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

These reading anchor standards cross all grade levels, from K – 12, and all courses in history, social studies, science, & technical subjects for grade 6 – 12. Regardless of the grade or subject, there is no change in the language, order, or structure of these anchor standards, so whether kindergarteners or high school seniors, students are expected to demonstrate age and grade-level appropriate proficiency on each of these standards. By keeping the language identical, the CCSS push for a coherent focus on core skills at every grade level and in every classroom.

Furthermore, although the idea of literacy is broken down into different strands for the sake of clarity, literacy skills are—in actual practice—integrated. As you consider your own classroom instruction, remember that you will often be addressing multiple standards and strands in one well-designed task.

From Anchor to Grade-Level Standard

If the anchor standards state the core skills and practices in a broad way, the grade-level standards state what that skill should look like at each grade level, giving teachers the specificity needed to teach and assess student mastery of the standard in their classrooms.

For example, here’s how the first reading anchor standard is treated at various grade levels.
### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

#### Grade 1: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

#### Grade 3: Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

#### Grade 5: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

#### Grade 7: Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

#### Grade 9–10: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

#### Grade 11–12: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

As you can see, the content standards build on one another throughout the grades, increasing in complexity with each year and eventually leading to a level of college and career competency. However, throughout, the original anchor standard (“Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text”) remains clearly evident.

Remember:

- The anchor standard is the core standard.

**WHILE**…

- The grade-level standard is the expression of that core standard at a specific grade level or subject area.
The anchor standard doesn’t change from one grade level or subject area to the next.

WHILE...

- The grade-level standards form a progression of understanding from one year to the next.

Grade-Level Groups

The CCSS handle the ELA/Literacy standards in three groups:

- Kindergarten – Grade 5
- Grades 6 – 12 ELA
- Grades 6 – 12 Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects

Within each grade or grade-range, the anchor strands are further broken into groups that contain the specific grade-level standards. For example, in K – 5 the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading are addressed in three groups—Reading: Literature; Reading: Informational Text; and Reading: Foundational Skills.

The chart below shows the complete breakdown of strands by grade levels. Note how the Grades 6 – 12 Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects section only contain Reading and Writing anchor standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten – Grade 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>College and Career Readiness</strong></td>
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<td>Anchor Standards for Reading</td>
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Explore for Buy-In

As a teacher, it’s important that you understanding the thinking behind the Common Core State Standards so that you can “buy in” to them and embrace their power and potential in your own classroom. Visit the Common Core State Standards website (http://www.corestandards.org) to see the Standards for yourself. Take a close look. Compare them to the standards that you are used to. Consider how these new standards might energize your teaching and your students’ learning!