



Reading, Writing, and the Common Core State Standards

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Introduction and summary

During the 2014-15 school year, more high school seniors read the young adult-oriented books *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Divergent* than Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, according to a report that tracks what K-12 students at more than 30,000 schools are reading during the school year.¹ These books are generally self-selected, making it not all that surprising that students would prefer to read a contemporary *New York Times* bestseller than a 17th-century play written in early modern English. And while some of the books that students select are thematically targeted to a mature audience, they are not particularly challenging to read for the average high schooler. *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Divergent*, for example, have the readability of a fourth- or fifth-grade text in terms of sentence structure and word difficulty.²

There is substantial evidence that much of what students are currently reading is not particularly challenging. This lack of complexity in students' reading and writing is likely undermining their preparedness for college and the workplace. In addition, despite the predominant role that reading and writing serve in other subjects and disciplines, literacy development has long been relegated to the English or reading classroom.

Take the issue of reading complexity. Three of the top five most commonly assigned titles in grades 9 through 12 are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Crucible*, and *Of Mice and Men*.³ All three books, while classics, are not particularly challenging in terms of sentence structure and complexity. Does that mean that Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, which broaches issues of racial inequality should instead be introduced to elementary school-aged children? Most people—including English teachers—probably would not agree. Readability is only one factor when considering the intended audience of a work of literature.

But the difficulty of the reading material to which students are exposed is not inconsequential. An ACT report finds that “performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are likely to be ready for college and those who are not.” This holds true across gender, race and ethnicity, and family income levels.⁴

Yet there is a stark gap between the complexity of texts that high school students are reading and of those that they will confront in college and in their careers. Students reading at the average level of high school texts, for example, may be comfortable with as little as 5 percent of university-level texts and with only one-quarter of the texts that they would encounter in the military or the workplace.⁵

One only need skim the data to see that just a small proportion of students are on the path to graduate from high school ready for college and a career. Only one-third of fourth- and eighth-grade students—36 percent and 34 percent, respectively—performed at the proficient level or higher in reading, according to the most recent data, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP.⁶ Students do not close these gaps as they continue in the K-12 system. Only 38 percent of high school seniors are proficient in reading according to NAEP,⁷ and NAEP reading scores are even bleaker for black high school students at 16 percent, Latino students at 23 percent, and English language learners, or ELLs, at 4 percent.⁸ And while students in the fourth grade are reading on par with students in other high-performing countries,⁹ U.S. 15-year-olds rank 17th out of students in 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.¹⁰

The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects—or ELA standards for short—help address some of these readiness gaps. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia are currently in the process of implementing the state-developed ELA and math Common Core K-12 standards, which were finalized in 2010.¹¹

The ELA standards are changing how students read and write in American classrooms in some fundamental ways. Under the new standards, students are getting regular practice with complex and grade-level appropriate texts, using more informational texts, and practicing more evidence-based writing.

The ELA standards are also influencing the way teachers approach instruction to help students achieve the standards. Teachers are exposing students to grade-appropriate texts. They are applying instructional techniques to help students analyze and better comprehend more difficult texts. And because the Common Core ELA standards apply to a variety of disciplines, teachers across the curriculum—including history, the sciences, and technical subjects—are sharing in the responsibility for developing students' literacy skills and knowledge.

This report examines these key shifts in the ELA standards more closely, as well as the research basis for their inclusion and the potential benefits for students.

In order to fully realize the promise of more rigorous standards to help all students achieve at high levels and graduate from high school truly prepared for college and a career, the Center for American Progress offers the following recommendations to state and district leaders:

- **Push ahead with the Common Core standards and aligned assessments.**

Implementation has faced its expected challenges, but hints of progress as a result of the standards are beginning to emerge. Many states are now using more robust assessments to measure student learning that are aligned to the standards, for example. Instructional practice is also changing as result, and more students are getting more exposure to informational texts and are practicing evidence-based writing.

- **Strengthen training supports for prospective and current teachers, including teachers of other subjects.** Teachers still report the need for more professional development. Noted in multiple surveys of teachers, their most pressing need is professional learning regarding how to best differentiate instruction for students at various achievement levels, students with disabilities, and ELLs.¹² In addition, guidance and training on how to best support student writing about complex issues and persuasive writing are also in great demand.¹³ Non-ELA teachers, who assume a great responsibility for students' literacy under the new standards, are especially lacking the preparation and support they need to carry out the standards effectively.

- **Ensure that teachers have access to and are using high-quality curricular materials and tools aligned to the Common Core.** The quality and alignment to the standards of most of the materials that are available to teachers has been problematic since implementation first got underway. States and districts, with teachers, need to play a more supportive role in vetting curricular materials.

The Common Core ELA standards offer educators a roadmap to arm students with the core knowledge and literacy skills they need to be prepared for college and the workplace. States should remain steadfast in their implementation of the standards and ensure that teachers have the training supports and curricular resources they need to meet the standards' instructional demands.

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