



"Bringing the Common Core to Life"
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Part 4
Introduction to the Common Core State Standards for
ELA & Literacy
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Let's talk about literacy for a minute and then I'll go into the more in-depth pictures. In literacy, does anyone know offhand the shape of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 8th grade over the last 40 years? So over the last 40 years, what's happened to reading scores in the 8th grade in this country? A lot of people are doing this--it is flat. There has been no change. During this same period, unfortunately, we have doubled the amount we invest in education. So it is certainly troubling that there has been no movement here. What's obviously troubling about it is if a kid can't read past an 8th grade level, they are doomed in terms of college and career readiness. We don't have to get fancy about this. They can't read the textbooks in any discipline they encounter. Interestingly, it was once hoped that you didn't have to read so well to succeed in your career, but the evidence has become absolutely clear that with careers changing so much it is no longer safe to narrowly specialize in a single area. So there is no overstating the wall we have hit in 8th grade reading and how consequential it is to the kids we care about. Less than 50% make it overall and if you break down those statistics by poverty or race they are terrifying. And there is no progress. That is not only a New York problem that is an everywhere problem. We designed the core standards to be a spear or battering ram to break down that wall. That is what is underneath them. So I ask you to consider, there are many people who say, and forgive me for this, they say, "We're already doing the things you're going to say. We're already focusing in math. We're already teaching this way in literacy." That better be wrong because if we don't have a shift, we are not going to change a wall that's been standing for 40 years. So I invite you, many of you who have more experience and intelligence than I, to look towards a shift, to think about what really changes here and I'm going to give you six examples of the fundamental underlying shifts in the literacy standards.

Number one, it begins in the earliest grades. We in America in K-5 assessment and curriculum focus 80% of our time on stories, on literature. That is the dominant work that is done in the elementary school and that's what's tested on exams and that's what's in our textbooks. However, the research is overwhelmingly clear and actually Dr. Steiner has been an early proponent of this research at its earlier stages, that in kindergarten through 5th grade, the general knowledge that you develop in those years plays a crucial predictive role in not only your performance in those other disciplines, like science and

history, but your ability to read more complex text itself. That is, the elementary school's a magnificent place for students to learn about the world through reading. Whoever thought otherwise? So the core standards for the first time demand that 50% of the text students encounter in kindergarten through 5th grade is informational text, meaning primarily text about science and history, text about the arts, the text through which students learn about the world. That is a major shift and if you think about what's happening in this country unintentionally literature and stories dominated the elementary curriculum. And then we expanded the literacy block. So we made the literacy block 80% of the time. Guess what that meant? We destroyed history and science in the elementary school.

The core standards are a chance to regain the proper role of the elementary school teacher, to bring their students into the world, to spend equal time on informational and story, and in that way build a real foundation for literacy--that is the first major step. And the standards strongly encourage that the knowledge that's built through this reading and read alouds and then students reading themselves in history and science and the arts—it is coherent both within grades and across grades that students are building this foundation of knowledge. That's the first shift—50/50—informational text and literary text in K-5 required by the standards and required in both the standards and assessments that measure them. We were explicit about this.

Number two. It extends that same interest in the broad base of literacy, extends to 6th to 12th grade. We were asked originally to write standards for English Language Arts, college and career ready standards for English Language Arts. The working team refused. We said if we just did standards for English Language Arts they would not be standards for career and college readiness. And at that point it was too late to fire us so we won that standoff. The standards are instead as you know the common core standards for English Language Arts as well as literacy and history and social studies, as well as science and technical subjects. They demand they do not request that the building of knowledge through reading text plays a fundamental role in those disciplines. In history and social studies, the analysis of primary and secondary documents is a core part of building knowledge. And in science, the analysis of reference materials, direct experimental result, debate obviously integrated with other data, but reading sufficiently complex text at the heart of it. To give you a sense of how different this is from what happens today, we have evidence that in kindergarten through 5th grade kids read informational text 7% of the time. And in later grades, ACT just did a study of how well students could read a complex science text, 24% of the students who take the ACT can read a college-level science text. That's those who take the ACT. We know that the wider group of students we serve many of them don't even take the test. It is that large a gap so the commitment to making literacy a fundamental part of gaining knowledge in those disciplines is the second major move of these core standards.

The third move is that text complexity matters. The difficulty or complexity of what you're reading plays the guiding role in guiding literacy performance rather than the skills by which you are reading it. So typical of state standards, not necessarily New York State's—I'm going to try to avoid making fun of any New York State standards during this presentation—but some state standards have a situation like this: in 5th grade, you're meant to study a character's motivation; in 7th grade, you study their underlying motivation. Now, in my experience, most motivations are underlying unless someone is mugging you. So it's not exactly the most useful distinction in the world. The real distinction in the growth of reading is of course the level of complexity of the text that you're managing. But for the first time these core standards create a staircase of text complexity, of expectations year by year of the level of text complexity you need to master. And what we found by the research, which is in Appendix A for you eager students who read beyond the required reading, in Appendix A of the standards is the research that demonstrates that the level of text that kids are reading today in high school are systematically beneath what they need to be to be college and career ready. You get what I am saying, right? That is, what they are assigned and what they are required to read is far below what they'll be required for most career work and college work. Guess why there's remediation? So the standards realign the curve from kindergarten forwards towards college and career readiness creating a skewed staircase towards college and career readiness.

The fourth shift in literacy is a shift towards focusing on questions that require you to pay attention to the text itself. I call them text-dependent questions. Now, this may seem quite obvious to you, but let me tell you the results of an informal study we did of instruction in Vermont and Texas. Now, we were looking for two of the most similar states possible, which is why we chose those two. And what we found was is a remarkable similarity between those two very different places and it was that 80% of the questions kids were asked when they are reading are answerable without direct reference to the text itself. Think about it, right? You're reading a text and you talk about the background of the text, or what it reminds you of, or what you think about it, or what you criticize or perhaps how you feel or react to it, or all sorts of surrounding issues—kids are genius at this—because anything to avoid confronting the difficult words before them is money. So what's happened in reading instruction, despite our intentions, is an enormous amount of time is spent with questions that hover around text but don't require the close consideration of it. We'll return to this when we look at the letter from Birmingham Jail in a couple of minutes.

The fifth point is about writing. Do people know the two most popular forms of writing in the American high school today? Texting someone said; I don't think that's for credit though yet. But I would say that as someone said it is personal writing. It is either the exposition of a personal opinion or it is the presentation of a personal matter. The only problem, forgive me for saying this so bluntly, the only problem with those two forms of writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people really don't give a sheet about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an

argument with evidence, is there something verifiable behind what you're saying or what you think or feel that you can demonstrate to me. It is rare in a working environment that someone says, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood." That is rare. It is equally rare in college by the way. So a group of Minnesota professors got together and they very, very wonderfully created a program called "Ready or Not," where they accepted essay submissions from around the state from high school seniors to see whether they're college ready or not. Ninety-seven percent of what was provided to them was narrative and 97% of that was deemed not college ready. The core standards thus mark a shift. They do support training in narrative throughout K-12 but what they make primary as you grow is the ability to write an argument based on evidence and convey complex information. This is an essential shift.

The sixth shift -- and then luckily I am done, there are no more -- is that academic vocabulary is the true language of power and that is particularly true for our English Language Learners and a wide variety of kids we care about most. This replaces the unstated language of power in earlier literacy standards which were basically the buildup of thousands of literary terms. If you look in a high school English Language Arts textbook, you will see pages and pages of literary terminology. The most popular 3rd grade standard in America today before the common core, 3rd grade, is what is the difference between a fable, a myth, a tale, and a legend? The only problem with that question is no one knows what the difference is and no one probably cares what the difference is either, but it's inscrutable. Instead what the standards focus on, there is some literary terminology and I myself have a Master's in English Literature from Oxford so I say this with great love, those terms are very useful when used appropriately, but they are not a separate object of study. In the same way, the core object of study must be the academic vocabulary that pervades complex text of all types. These are words like appearance or consequential or deliberate. Unlike what are sometimes called tier three or domain-specific words like cell wall or amoeba, they are very rarely bolded on the side of the page, helpfully to guide you. They're an underlying language of complexity that pervades everything complex you read. As you can imagine they build a wall around these texts that many of our students cannot penetrate. So what the core standards do is focus their attention while not sacrificing the literary and the core literary terms by focusing that more we have room for far more attention for an academic vocabulary that pervades the others.

Sometimes I sum up the standards by saying they require you to read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter. More and more I feel like I should say, "Read like a detective and write like a conscientious investigative reporter." With that said, I'm going to pause for a minute for some immediate questions and then I'd like to talk with you about Dr. King's letter from Birmingham Jail.