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# The Common Core and Reading Comprehension: What's in the Standards and What We Need to Teach

by Maureen McLaughlin and Brenda Overturf

As schools across the United States continue to implement the Common Core State Standards, one question seems to permeate literacy educators' thoughts: How will the CCSS impact the teaching of reading? The answer, of course, is that the Standards will influence our instruction, including our teaching of reading comprehension.

Several important points about teaching reading are made in the introduction to the Standards. For example, in a preliminary section entitled, "Key Design Considerations," the authors of the CCSS note that the Standards are built on an integrated model of literacy (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). How Standards from all four strands—Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language—might be integrated in a literacy lesson appear in Figure 1.

Another point that is made in the "Key Design Considerations," is that instructional choices are left to teachers. Specifically, the document notes:

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. (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4)

So, essentially, the Common Core has provided the Standards. Teaching students how to meet the Standards is in our hands.

While the Standards focus on a number of literacy skills, "they do not describe all that can or should be taught" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). This leaves us with a dual task: teaching the literacy skills in the Standards and nurturing active, strategic readers who successfully comprehend text. To ensure our students meet their maximum potentials, we need to continue to teach reading comprehension strategies.

## Active, Strategic Readers

Much of what we know about comprehension is based on studies of good readers. These students actively participate in reading. They have clear goals and constantly monitor the relation between the goals they have set and the text they are reading (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pressley, 2000). They also use a repertoire of comprehension strategies to facilitate the construction of meaning. Researchers note that using such strategies helps students become metacognitive readers, who can think about and monitor their thinking while reading (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Roehler & Duffy, 1984).

Good readers read widely, monitor their understanding, and negotiate meaning. They know when they are constructing meaning and when they are not. When comprehension breaks down because of lack of background information, difficulty of words, or unfamiliar text structure, good readers know and use a variety of "fix up" strategies. These include rereading, changing the pace of reading, using context clues, and cross-checking cueing

## Figure 1: Example of a Rich Instructional Task for Informational Text

The CCSS are based on an integrated model of literacy. As such, the strands—Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language—in which the expectations of the Common Core are detailed, are inextricably linked (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Standards from these strands can and should be integrated in literacy lessons that are structured as rich instructional tasks. For example, in a typical literacy lesson, Standards could be integrated in the following way:

### Reading Informational Text

— Students read a text to determine the author's opinion about a topic, and the reasons the author includes for the opinion (RIT Standard 8). Students ask and answer questions as they read (RIT Standard 1).

**Language** — Students engage in a vocabulary strategy to determine the meanings of unfamiliar domain-specific words and phrases used in the text (L Standards 4 and 6).

**Speaking and Listening** — Students participate in a collaborative conversation about the author's opinions, reasons, and evidence in the text, following grade-level guidelines for academic discussion (SL Standard 1).

**Writing** — Students write their own opinion about a topic related to the text, following the grade-level guidelines for writing an opinion (W Standard 1).

systems. These readers are able to select the appropriate strategies and consistently focus on making sense of text.

## Explicit Instruction of Comprehension Strategies

We know that research supports the teaching of reading comprehension strategies (Duffy, 2001; Duke & Pearson, 2002). Duke and Pearson (2002) suggest incorporating “both explicit instruction in specific comprehension strategies and a great deal of time and opportunity for actual reading, writing, and discussion of text.” (p. 206).

## Comprehension and the Common Core

The Common Core State Standards outline a number of skills which are related to comprehension, such as asking and answering questions about a text, determining main idea, and distinguishing point of view. The Standards also require students to discuss and write about text, both of which foster comprehension. However, the skills in the Standards are based on a student’s ability to comprehend text at a basic level. Effective instruction links comprehension skills to strategies to promote strategic reading. For example, the comprehension skills of sequencing, noting details, and using text structure support summarizing, which is a comprehension strategy.

One of the expectations of the CCSS (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) is that students “readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature” (p. 3). This attention to students’ ability to read closely to comprehend an author’s message is a focus of the Standards for both literature and informational text. Exploring such ideas is a worthy goal, but students still need to know a repertoire of comprehension strategies to construct meaning when reading, analyzing, and interpreting text.

It is important to remember that the Standards delineate student

expectations. As the authors of the Common Core State Standards note in the introduction of the document, “The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6). This is a powerful statement, because it provides a blueprint for literacy curriculum development in the age of the Common Core. Rather than replacing existing curriculums with the Standards, districts should be striving to integrate the Standards into sound literacy curriculums—student-centered curriculums that include the teaching of reading comprehension strategies.

## References

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- Duke, N.K., & Pearson, P.D. (2002). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. In A.E. Farstrup & S.J. Samuels (Eds.), *What research has to say about reading instruction* (3rd ed., pp. 205–242). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Fielding, L.G., & Pearson, P.D. (1998). Reading comprehension: What works. *Educational Leadership*, 51(5), 68–69.
- National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). *Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved August 25, 2012 from [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSS\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSS_ELA%20Standards.pdf)
- Palincsar, A.S., & Brown, A.L. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117–175.
- Pressley, M. (2006, April). *What the future of reading research could be*. Paper presented at the International Reading Association Reading Research Conference, Chicago.
- Rehder, J.R., & Duffy, G.G. (1984). Direct explanation of comprehension processes.

## Resources for Reading Comprehension Strategies

Teachers looking for publications that focus on the teaching of reading comprehension strategies might consider the following:



Blachowicz, C., & Ogle, D. (2008). *Reading Comprehension: Strategies for Independent Learners* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Guilford.



Harvey, S., & Gaudvis, A. (2007). *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse.



McLaughlin, M. (2012). *Guided Comprehension for English Learners*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.



McLaughlin, M. (2010). *Guided Comprehension in the Primary Grades* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.



McLaughlin, M., & Allen, M.B. (2009). *Guided Comprehension in Grades 3 - 8* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

In G.G. Duffy, J.R. Rehder, & J. Mason (Eds.), *Comprehension instruction: Perspectives and suggestions* (pp. 265–280). New York: Longman.

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