

Common Core and ELLs:

Key Shifts in Language Arts and Literacy

By Susan Lafond

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy are rigorous, internationally benchmarked, and aligned with college and work expectations. They also differ in many respects from the ELA/reading standards that many states currently use. Most notably, they set requirements not only for English language arts but also for literacy across the content areas in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. The literacy standards in the content areas are intended to complement the content standards, not supplant them. The K-5 standards are cross-disciplinary; grades 6-12 for ELA and for literacy in the content areas foster the idea of a shared responsibility for literacy development.

In addition, the instructional shifts of the Common Core set high expectations for teachers if they are to be truly aligned with the standards in terms of curricular materials and classroom instruction. EngageNY, a collaborative platform for teachers in New York, discusses these shifts, which require teachers to:

- ★ Expect active participation of all students
- ★ Facilitate the learning process rather than disseminate the information
- ★ Make their content literacy expertise visible to all
- ★ Create carefully structured situations that allow students to solve problems independently
- ★ Encourage students to draw on their abilities to discover answers by themselves rather than rely on adults to supply the facts

To understand what these changes will look like in the classroom, let's take a closer look at the shifts and what they mean for both teachers and students.

What Are the Shifts?

Shift 1: Balancing Informational & Literary Texts (K-5) Students read a true balance of informational and literary texts. Elementary school classrooms are, therefore, places where students access the world — science, social studies, the arts and literature — through text. At least 50% of what students read is informational. [4th grade -50%; 8th grade- 55%; 12th grade -70%]

What the student does	What the teacher does
Build content knowledge	Balance informational and literary text
Exposure to the world through reading	Scaffold for informational text
Apply strategies	Teach through and with text

Shift 2: Knowledge in the Disciplines (Grades 6-12) Content area teachers outside of the ELA classroom emphasize literacy experiences in their planning and instruction. Students learn through domain specific texts in science and social studies classrooms — rather than referring to the text, they are expected to learn from what they read.

What the student does	What the teacher does
Build content knowledge through text	Shift identity: “I teach reading”
Handle primary source documents	Stop referring and summarizing and start reading
Find evidence	Slow down the history and science classroom

Shift 3: Staircase of Complexity In order to prepare students for the complexity of college and career ready texts, each grade level requires a "step" of growth on the "staircase". Students read the central, grade appropriate text around which instruction is centered. Teachers are patient, create more time and space in the curriculum for this close and careful reading, and provide appropriate and necessary scaffolding and supports so that it is possible for students reading below grade level.

What the student does	What the teacher does
Re-read text	Teach more complex texts at every grade level
Read material at own level to enjoy reading	Give students less to read in order to read more in depth
Tolerate frustration with text	Spend more time on complex texts
	Provide strategies and scaffolding to students
	Engage with texts with other adults

Shift 4: Text-based Answers Students have rich and rigorous conversations which are dependent on a common text. Teachers insist that classroom experiences stay deeply connected to the text on the page and that students develop habits for making evidentiary arguments both in conversation, as well as in writing to assess comprehension of a text.

What the student does	What the teacher does
Find evidence to support argument	Facilitate evidence-based conversations about the text
Form own judgments and become scholars	Plan and conduct rich conversations
Conduct close reading of the text	Keep students in the text
Engage with the author and his/her choices	Identify questions that are text-dependent, worthwhile and stimulate discussion
	Spend much more time preparing for instruction by reading deeply

Shift 5: Writing from Sources Writing needs to emphasize use of evidence to inform or make an argument rather than the personal narrative and other forms of decontextualized prompts. While the narrative still has an important role, students develop skills through written arguments that respond to the ideas, events, facts, and arguments presented in the texts they read.

What the student does	What the teacher does
Generate informational texts	Spend less time on personal narratives
Make arguments using evidence	Present opportunities to write from multiple sources
Organize for persuasion	Provide opportunities to analyze and synthesize ideas
Compare multiple sources	Develop student voice so they can argue a point with evidence
	Give permission to reach and articulate their own conclusions about what they read

Shift 6: Academic Vocabulary Students constantly build the vocabulary they need to access grade level complex texts. By focusing strategically on comprehension of pivotal and commonly found words (such as "discourse," "generation," "theory," and "principled") and less on esoteric literary terms (such as "onomatopoeia" or "homonym"), teachers constantly build students' ability to access more complex texts across the content areas.

What the student does	What the teacher does
Use high octane words across content areas	Develop student ability to use and access words
Build language of power database	Be strategic about new vocabulary words
	Work with words students will use frequently
	Teach fewer words more deeply

From the ELA Common Core Introduction:

**Distribution of Literary and Informational Passages by Grade
in the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework**

Grade	Literary	Informational
4	50%	50%
8	45%	55%
12	30%	70%

**Distribution of Communicative Purposes by Grade
in the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework**

Grade	persuade	explain	Convey experience
4	30%	35%	35%
8	35%	35%	30%
12	40%	40%	20%

What does this mean for English language learners?

For more information about the CCSS and ELLs, take a look at our Common Core [resource section](#). The shifts have important implications for ELLs. Most importantly, ELLs need to be involved in the learning and taking part in a way that allows them to experience hands-on, student-centered learning. By having ELLs simply watch the other students interact, they are relegated to a position that will not maximize their time spent in the classroom.

That works hand-in-hand with the second expectation for planning classroom instruction, which is that ELLs need to be fully engaged in the learning process. Students learn best by doing. Working in cooperative groups or peer tutoring are two ways that involve students in the learning process.

It's also critical to remember, however, that while learning in collaborative groups is beneficial, an opportunity to be accountable for one's own learning is also needed for ELLs. In order to challenge students, teachers need to carefully craft a supportive environment and design ways that allow students to take risks, grapple with real-life situations, and problem solve as they will be expected to do whether at college or on the job. (For more on helping ELLs become more independent learners, see the "[Language Instruction](#)" playlist of Dr. Diane August's video interview.)

In addition, the Standards establish a shared responsibility for literacy development across the disciplines, not just for the ELA teacher. Teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects are expected to "use their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields." This means that content and literacy are taught simultaneously, providing ELLs with the opportunity to strengthen their literacy skills as they acquire content knowledge.

Finally, these shifts remind us that students have learned at a young age that most questions asked in school have only one correct answer. And the keeper of that answer has been the teacher. We know that students have greater retention of information when they have the opportunity to discover the answer themselves versus simply being told the answer. The process leading to the answer enhances the comprehension of concepts, which is why doing an experiment is far more powerful than watching someone else do it.

It is clear that helping ELLs (and their English-speaking peers) adjust to these shifts will provide new challenges for educators and for the students themselves. Teachers, paraprofessional aides, and administrators will have to be creative in finding the most effective way to deliver engaging instruction and professional development. By better understanding what the shifts mean and how the mastery of this new approach will benefit our students, however, we can take the first important steps to helping our students succeed with the Common Core State Standards.