

# **Knowledge Matters High School Review Tool:**

## **A Guide for Evaluating 9–12 English Curriculum**

This tool is for use by states, districts, and schools when examining an English curriculum to determine the degree to which it supports the development of students’ knowledge, understanding, and literary competencies. The tool is designed to be used as a plug-in for other evaluation instruments and rubrics because it illuminates in detail how knowledge-building can be accomplished in English curricula. We hope publishers will use this tool to guide improvements in their products as well.

By the time students reach high school, they are expected to read, think about, and produce increasingly sophisticated texts that demand not just fluency and mastery of decoding but also a growing reservoir of knowledge, vocabulary, and conceptual understanding across disciplines.<sup>1</sup> A strong high school English curriculum builds upon students’ stores of knowledge through sustained engagement with content-rich topics drawn from history, science, the arts, and literature—because a rich knowledge base is what makes complex texts comprehensible and literary analysis meaningful. This tool focuses on whether the curriculum provides all students with the knowledge, analytical capacity, and language they need to engage with the complex texts of college, career, and civic life.

Across the eight dimensions identified are a total of 26 separate criteria. All eight dimensions are important. Reviewers should note evidence of strong, moderate, or weak support for each of the criteria. While not all criteria within a dimension need to be uniformly strong, any dimension that is deemed predominantly “weak” should be cause for concern. Obviously, the stronger the ratings, the better.

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<sup>1</sup> Disciplines in this context refers to the sciences, history/social studies, literature, the arts, and technical subjects.

# 1: Laser-like focus on what matters most for literacy

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is driven by the integration of literacy accelerators that have a formidable research base. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expanding students' vocabulary knowledge through a volume of reading, explicit instruction, and many opportunities to hear and use general academic and domain-specific words;</li><li>• Building upon and deepening students' general knowledge of the world so they have the essential knowledge to reference when they read, write, and present;</li><li>• Guiding students to marshal evidence and use it when speaking and writing about what the texts they are reading are communicating; and</li><li>• Building solid reading habits and stamina through the regular, close reading of challenging, content-rich texts to develop a standard of coherence—an expectation and ability to have what is read make sense.</li></ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is designed to seamlessly integrate practices from ELA standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as facility with language. The standards themselves are not the goal of daily instruction; instead, the goal of instruction is to develop students' ability to understand texts they encounter and to express that understanding in multiple ways. Standards mastery is the end result of, not the organizing force for, reading instruction.</p>



<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes the use of strategies in context and as needed: when students encounter challenging sections of text, strategies encourage students to engage in mental moves to support their comprehension. <sup>2</sup> As with standards, strategy instruction is not the goal of lessons but rather a means to build comprehension and knowledge.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Text selection shows evidence of curation and coherence. Lessons: 1) are well-paced, 2) provide sustained opportunities to study texts, topics, content, and questions in depth rather than through brief, disconnected encounters, 3) can reasonably be completed within the school year, and 4) avoid bulk and bloat by ensuring there is a strong rationale for each component of the curriculum.

Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Sense-making strategies attend to text structure, common organizational structures, comprehension monitoring, inferencing, and others.



## 2: Communal close reading of content-rich, challenging texts

STRONG  
MODERATE  
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes regular, communal close reading for all students with high-quality, complex texts that anchor each unit. These texts are at or above students' grade-band level, as defined by quantitative and qualitative analyses and represent the range of text types students will encounter in college and career settings—including literary fiction and nonfiction, foundational U.S. documents, and seminal essays. Curriculum includes regular, consistent, and multiple opportunities for students to engage with long-form texts, such as novels.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides repeated encounters with each challenging, content-rich complex text to allow students to grapple with high-quality, text-specific questions and build their understanding. <sup>3</sup> Discussions grounded in making meaning of texts are a regular dimension of these sense-making encounters.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Culminating assignments regularly reflect what is essential for students to learn from the text(s), including the information contained within them; offer practice using more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax; and are aligned to several grade-level (or above) standards.

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<sup>3</sup> Lesson focus is expressly on students securing specific knowledge about the content and structure of the text, not on single skills or isolated standards (like “find the main idea” or “find the key details”) that employ texts and topics as their vehicles for discrete skills attainment.



### 3: Systematic development of high-value academic language to support building knowledge

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides robust vocabulary and syntax routines in context (through text-based questions and tasks) and out of context (through games, exercises, etc). These routines are designed to strengthen verbal reasoning as well as knowledge of morphology and etymology.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Words chosen for extended study in context are generally 1) essential to understanding, 2) more abstract, 3) part of a semantic word family (i.e., words related by meaning or concept), and 4) likely to appear in other complex texts students will read.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum revisits newly learned words and phrases in multiple contexts, including encouraging students to use them in their discussions and in speaking and writing activities.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum systematically develops students' command of domain-specific and cross-disciplinary academic language—including terms from literary criticism and rhetoric—that are essential for college- and career-level discourse.
Notes			



## 4: A volume of reading organized around conceptually coherent text sets to build knowledge

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum is intentionally designed around coherent units of study that invite sustained engagement. Through extended study, students build knowledge about the world; deepen their understanding of texts they are reading and ideas they are learning; expand their academic language; and develop increasingly sophisticated competencies in reading, writing, discussion, and analysis.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides a series of conceptually coherent text sets (or relies on full-length books) available at various complexity levels, with less-complex texts supporting access to more-complex texts to build knowledge and necessary conceptual understanding. These texts offer a range of different knowledge-building resources with both fiction and nonfiction texts represented.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum expects students to regularly engage in a volume of reading of materials of their choice related to the topics being studied. The curriculum includes teacher and student scaffolds and structures, including lightweight student accountability (e.g., book talks, journals) to foster productive use of the reading time.
Notes			



## 5: Regular discussions grounded in texts and topics to build knowledge

STRONG  
MODERATE  
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The curriculum provides guidance on engaging learners in productive and sustained academic discussions through thought-provoking questions that develop a robust understanding of the texts and content being studied, including cultivating students' abstract reasoning and analytical thinking. When students answer questions, they are consistently required to provide evidence and reasoning for their responses.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum structures collaborative inquiry around text-based questions and tasks, using protocols, routines, and structures so that collaboration is a consistent vehicle for deepening and processing knowledge and building arguments.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Peer-to-peer, text-centered discussions are threaded throughout instruction to make classrooms vibrant centers of intellectual exchange and co-learning.

Notes



## 6: A volume of writing to build knowledge

STRONG  
MODERATE  
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes frequent writing opportunities that are anchored in the texts and content students are studying. Writing includes regular opportunities for students to analyze texts, develop arguments, synthesize ideas across sources, and conduct focused research projects, including, when appropriate, those in support of disciplinary inquiry.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes writing assignments that vary in purpose, audience, genre, length, and duration and are meaningfully connected to the texts, topics, and ideas under study, building students' stamina and competency as writers over time.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes explicit instruction in writing, including complex sentence construction and related conventions.

Notes



## 7: Targeted supports to ensure all students have access to challenging, grade-level content

STRONG  
MODERATE  
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The curriculum provides both the systematic guidance and resources required for building in time and support for students reading below grade level, and/or students learning English, so that they can access the text and learn alongside peers. Curriculum provides the means to ensure all students work with and can develop proficiency toward command of grade-level standards.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes strong representation of authors from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds in the texts students read; abundant opportunities to encounter how people from historically underrepresented communities have contributed to knowledge, art, and civic life; and guidance on how to implement the curriculum in a manner that promotes equity, elevates student assets, and creates space for students to see themselves in (and be challenged by) the texts they study.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides a range of supports designed to address results from informal and more formal assessments (gathered from observations, assignments, and test questions), and promotes timely and concrete feedback to students.

Notes



## 8: Ease of enacting curriculum

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum is purposeful in its design, including many regular, predictable instructional routines that teachers and students can rely on from the moment the new program is enacted.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is designed not only to advance student learning but also to help educators understand the “why” of included approaches and components. It incorporates educative dimensions (i.e., explanations designed explicitly to support teachers in effective implementation). Examples of such dimensions might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanations of how program elements facilitate student learning;</li> <li>• Sample student responses;</li> <li>• Tips for effective feedback;</li> <li>• Models of exemplary practice; and</li> <li>• Discussions of why suggested pedagogical moves are useful.</li> </ul>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher-facing materials are clear and concrete about which program elements are essential for the core instruction and which are “nice to have” additional dimensions. This clarity extends to communicating high-level program dimensions for caregivers and community stakeholders.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum encourages professional learning that deals concretely with how the materials can be effectively implemented and supports ongoing and systematic work in teacher study groups and professional learning communities. Professional learning should offer aligned sessions for teachers, coaches, and administrators.





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