

## **Standards Central**

### **Fordham's Reviews from the U.S. and Abroad**

## **Arkansas**

This state adopted the Common Core, so the review below is Fordham's review of the Common Core standards. To read our review of the state's standards in place prior to adopting the Common Core, [click here](#).

### **Overview**

The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* seek to provide the next generation of K-12 standards in order to ensure that all students are college and career-ready in literacy no later than the end of high school. Fordham reviewed an earlier draft of these standards in March 2010, and a number of improvements have been made since that iteration.

These final standards indeed reflect a thoughtful attempt to define skills in each area of English language arts, (ELA) as well as an effort to define how those skills might be nurtured in history/social studies, science and technical subjects. Although they would be more helpful to teachers if they attended as systematically to content as they do to skills, especially in the area of reading, the standards accompanied by a well-aligned and content-rich curriculum could provide a valuable tool to classroom teachers.

### **General Organization**

The document includes two categories of standards. The first is a list of College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards in each of four strands (reading, writing, listening and speaking, and language). These CCR standards are broad statements about what students should know and be able to do in each strand by the time they graduate from high school. The second category includes grade-appropriate learning expectations for each grade, K-12. These expectations are designed to provide additional specificity by translating the CCR standards into detailed, grade-specific learning objectives.

In grades 6-12, the standards also include a section devoted to literacy for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects which breaks the reading and writing CCRs into grade-level expectations for history and science teachers. (Note, though, that this review focuses on the core standards for ELA.)

Finally, the standards include three appendices. The first provides definitions of text complexity, more detailed guidance about early reading foundations, and definitions of text types. The second lists exemplar literary and informational texts by grade spans, as well as sample performance tasks which describe suggested instructional activities involving some of the cited

texts. The third provides annotated student writing samples that demonstrate what kind of writing is expected of students at each grade. The appendices must be considered components of the standards themselves in order for the standards to be effective.

## **Clarity & Specificity**

### **Content & Rigor**

For the most part, the standards are fairly specific about the skills that students should master each year, as in the following examples:

Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events) (grade 3)

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used (grades 11-12)

In other places, however, the language of the standards is a bit bloated or confusing, as in this vocabulary standard:

Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being (e.g., quizzed, whined, stammered) and that are basic to a particular topic (e.g., wildlife, conservation, and endangered when discussing animal preservation) (grade 4)

It is hard to imagine which words are not included in this all-encompassing standard, and it is not clear how using words that signal precise actions, emotions, or states of being should be counted among general academic and domain-specific words. Moreover, what is the expected student outcome here, and how could it be measured?

Similarly puzzling standards can be found here and there, including the following:

With some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting (grade 5)

How would a teacher measure students interacting and collaborating with others? Are students collaborating with others to produce and publish writing or for some other purpose?

In the following conventions standard, it is difficult to determine how a teacher would use this directive to drive instruction:

Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations (grades 9-10)

This standard implies that a writer can add interest simply by using different phrases and clauses. Most uninteresting sentences, by virtue of being sentences, have phrases and clauses. Sometimes, interest is much better generated with simple, straightforward language. Encouraging students to overcomplicate their sentences to make them seem more interesting seems like confusing, if not misguided, advice. Depending on the genre, word choice might, for example, be a better technique than sentence construction for adding interest. It looks as though this standard is designed to unnecessarily rationalize the study of clauses and phrases by assigning it an artificial purpose.

In other cases, the language is repeated verbatim across grades, for example:

Provide an objective summary of the text (grades 7-12)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings... (grades 6-12)

Such standards should either be included only as a capstone standard in a particular grade, or should be scaffolded from grade to grade to demonstrate a clear progression of rigor.

Finally, the organization of the reading standards is hard to follow. They are organized into four categories: Key Ideas and Details Craft and Structure Integration of Knowledge and Ideas and Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity. This framework creates a false sense of separation between inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in a literary text (treated under Key Ideas) and point of view (treated under Craft and Structure). Since many kinds of texts, genres, sub-genres, and their characteristics are discussed in each category, it is also difficult to determine whether a logical sequence covering all of this important content has been achieved. What's more, because the standards often offer a choice of genres to teachers, as in Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (emphasis added) coverage of essential genre-specific content is even harder to track.

## **Clarity and Specificity Conclusion**

Where clarity and specificity are concerned, the standards are an improvement on the March draft. In some strands, they illustrate more clearly the growth expected across grades. Still, the organization of the reading strand, as well as the instances of vague and unmeasurable language, mean that the standards do not ultimately provide sufficient clarity and detail to guide teachers and curriculum and assessment developers effectively. They therefore earn two points out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See Common Grading Metric.)

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Despite their imperfections, the Common Core ELA standards are far superior to those now in place in many states, districts, and classrooms. They are ambitious and challenging for students and educators alike. Accompanied by a properly aligned, content-rich curriculum, they provide K-12 teachers with a sturdy instructional framework for this most fundamental of subjects.

**English and Language Arts Grade (Common Core Grade): B+**