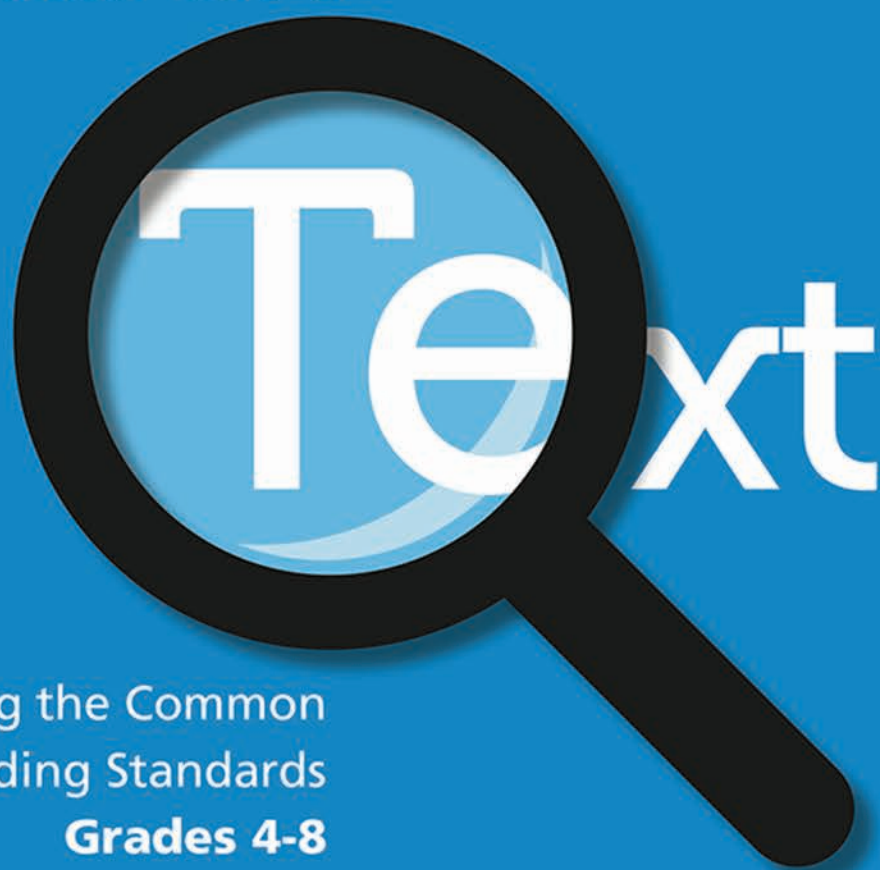


Focus on



Tackling the Common
Core Reading Standards
Grades 4-8

Amy Benjamin

An **Eye On Education** Book



Focus on Text

As schools shift to the Common Core, many English language arts teachers are left with questions about how their classrooms should look. *Is fiction out? Can I still do strategy instruction? Does close reading mean deliberating on each word?* Finally, there's a resource with all of these answers and more. In *Focus on Text*, bestselling author Amy Benjamin provides practical guidance on how to realistically implement the Common Core reading standards. Part I of the book examines misconceptions about the standards and what's really required. It also takes you inside classrooms to see how teachers are modifying their instruction. Part II tackles each reading standard for grades 4–8. You'll learn how to teach the standards with literary and informational texts and how to use them as a springboard for instruction in writing, language, speaking, and listening.

Topics include . . .

- Defining close reading and how it is different from word-by-word reading. When and how do students need to go over a text meticulously?
- How to use scaffolding through background knowledge to help students with challenging texts
- The best instructional practices to help students increase their range of reading and level of text complexity
- Ideas for teaching key concepts such as text structure, point of view, theme, stated and implied meanings, and the progression of ideas and characters
- Tweaking your assessments to better align with the Common Core—how to create reading check quizzes, unit tests, and cold reading tests to see if students are growing as readers
- And much, much more!

Throughout the book, you'll find teaching tips and practical resources to use with students, such as question starters and sentence stems. You'll also get a wide variety of classroom examples at different grade levels and with different texts. Whether you're experienced with the Common Core or just getting started, this book will give you exciting new ideas for making them work in your own classroom so your students grow as readers!

Amy Benjamin is a national education consultant and author of twelve books on teaching literacy. Before becoming a consultant, she was an award-winning English teacher in Montrose, New York.

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Focus on Text

Tackling the Common Core Reading Standards, Grades 4–8

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Meet the Author

After enjoying a long and rewarding career as an English teacher in the Hendrick Hudson School District in Montrose, New York, **Amy Benjamin** now works as a national consultant. Her goal is to improve education by helping teachers recognize the role that language plays in learning. As such, the Common Core State Standards, with their emphasis on literacy as a foundational skill across all subject areas, fit perfectly into her vision of education reform. Amy has been honored for excellence in teaching by Tufts University, Union College, and the New York State English Council. Her classroom was used as a model for standards-based teaching by the New York State Education Department. Amy lives in Dutchess County, New York, with her husband, Howard. Their son, Mitchell, lives in California and works in the television industry. This is the twelfth book that she has written for Eye On Education.

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Introduction

This book is about classroom practices that use the Common Core Reading Standards as a foundation for the other Literacy Standards (Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language). In this book, you will explore the ten Reading Standards in grades 4–8, with a glimpse at the grades 3 and 9–10 grade bands to give you perspective.

Although the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted in 2010, implemented by 2013, and officially assessed by 2014 (give or take, depending on the individual states), many educators are still tentative about exactly what is expected in classrooms on a day-to-day basis. I have the privilege of working with teachers and their supervisors across the United States. I begin my workshops by asking them to express their familiarity with the Common Core (Literacy Standards only—I leave the math to someone else) on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being “never heard of it” to 5 being “know it thoroughly.” I get a lot of 2’s. By reading this book, I hope that you will come to consider yourself close to a 5, on the Reading Standards, at least, and that you will see how the other Literacy Standards blend into them.

As you know, the Common Core State Standards, aka Common Core Literacy Standards, are described in detail on their website, which is www.corestandards.org. The authors have been well-organized and thorough. The website is easy to navigate, but the information is voluminous, as it has to be. It’s a lot to process. What follows is the original language of the Anchor Reading Standards, “thumb-nailed” by my own simplified version in bold.¹

So as not to overwhelm you with all thirty-two Literacy Standards, I’ve included the Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language Standards in Appendix B.



Key Ideas and Details

1. **Read closely.** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from text.

2. **Track themes and summarize main ideas.** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development, summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. **Understand and follow progressions.** Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. **Know what the words and phrases mean in a given context.** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. **Understand how and why the author has arranged the information according to certain organizing principles.** Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of text (e.g., section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. **Assess how point of view or purpose affects meaning.** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. **Understand charts, graphs, and other numerical information and media in addition to just the words.** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. **Judge the validity of arguments.** Delineate and evaluate the arguments and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. **Compare texts that address similar subjects. Consider both content and style.** Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. **Comprehend complex text.** Use exemplars in Appendix B of the Common Core Standards as a guide for grade level expectations (www.corestandards.org).

Regarding the range and content of the Reading Standards, the Core Standards document (www.corestandards.org) says:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare. Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenge posed by complex texts.

This assertion strongly supports the use of canonical literature and traditional historical documents and texts of speeches that are widely considered to be touchstones of American culture. However, the studying of such texts should not preclude pleasure readings of choice by the students and their teachers. Without the element of readings-by-choice, students will not build up the necessary fluency, nor will they ever become life-long readers.

The CCSS can be crystallized as three essential instructional shifts:

1. Comprehending literary and nonfiction text at a level of complexity that increases as students go from grade to grade, until students are college and career ready at the time of graduation from high school;
2. Writing that draws from evidence synthesized from worthy text-based sources; and
3. Reading that strengthens comprehension skills and builds knowledge about language and the world.

To achieve these objectives, students need consistent growth in academic vocabulary. Vocabulary is acquired first receptively (listening and reading) and then productively (speech and writing). Tweeting and texting may be “speech written down,” but academic writing requires control of formal conventions and the expected level of vocabulary. Students need to develop a range of levels of formality (language register) to function in various contexts. Students need to cultivate study skills that center on *careful, thorough reading of complex text*. To do this kind of reading and to answer questions and complete tasks based on it, students have to focus. The literacy demands of the Common Core, therefore, require a mode of thinking (i.e., concentration, as opposed to multi-tasking)

that goes against the grain of the fast-paced, multi-tasking habits that most of us have developed in our everyday, device-driven lives. As much as the world has changed since we were in school (even if that was recently), the demands of college and (many) careers still require patience and depth of comprehension in reading.

I believe in the philosophy that durable learning happens through the process of solving problems. First, we frame the problem, then we enter it with some knowledge; we engage in a process of gathering more information, sifting through to see what we might need; then, through trial and error, communication, patience, and a positive attitude, we move toward a solution. What we've learned along the way—especially the skills we've learned, we get to keep. I'm not saying that we remember everything we read and comprehend at the time. What I'm saying is that we get to keep the skills and habits of conscientious reading if we continue to practice reading as a problem-solving process. The problem might be onerous, such as taking a test or interpreting the legalistic language of a contract; or it may be recreational, such as reading an interesting but difficult story.

This book is divided into two parts. Part One begins with the voices of teachers just like you who talk about how the Common Core is changing their classrooms. Part One then gives you general information about the Reading Standards, followed by a detailed definition of text complexity and readability measurements. We then attempt to rescue the babies from the bathwater of the Common Core, followed by a careful look at the relationship between instruction and assessment, because the Common Core does necessitate some tweaking of that relationship. Part Two tackles the Reading Standards one by one.

In the next section, we'll begin by looking inside classrooms at how the Common Core is being implemented.

Note

1. These are called “Anchor Standards” because they remain the same throughout grades 3–12, with specific competencies and increasing text complexity designated for each of the grade levels.

**Part
One**

How the Reading Standards Are Being Implemented