



Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts & Literacy

Sarah Perry

Under the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), traditional English curricula are changed. The Standards state that as “college and career readiness overwhelmingly focuses on complex texts outside of literature, these standards [also] ensure students are being prepared to read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science.”¹ The English CCSS lay out a vision of what it means to “be a literate person in the twenty-first century,”² and describe the college- and career-ready student as one who:

- Demonstrates independence;
- Can build strong content knowledge;
- Responds to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline;
- Can comprehend as well as critique;
- Values evidence;
- Uses technology and digital media strategically and capably; and
- Understands other cultures and perspectives.³

CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) call for an “interdisciplinary approach” to literacy, and replace many of the classics of literature with technical informational texts – those more representative of writing seen in the workforce – with distribution of grade-wide literary and information passages to be 50% each by grade 4, and 30% literary and 70% informational by grade 12.⁴ The English practices blend research and media skills into the standards, and insist that responsibility for literacy be shared between instructors in a variety of subjects.

- The standards of English practice include: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language.
- Standards for English content include: classic world myths and stories, informational and technical texts, America’s founding documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare.

The CCSS drafters crafted the ELA standards under the assumption that students have suffered from years of easy reading and poor training in synthesizing more complex reading materials. Now that the Standards are in place, English teachers of the CCSS are mourning the loss of art and human connection once fostered with the study of fiction.⁵

While the specific admonition to teach 70% informational material in grade 12 is explained to be “across” the grade level in a range of subjects, the reality of the CCSS has relegated English teachers to sacrificing much of their literary content as the first line of defense in compliance.

English teachers have to make huge sacrifices in content in order to comply with Common Core English standards.⁶

Among the suggested nonfiction pieces for high school juniors and seniors that appear in the CCSS are “Executive Order 13423: Strengthening Federal, Environmental, Energy, and Transportation Management” by the General Services Administration, and “FedViews” (2009) by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco.⁷

Sandra Stotsky, author of the now-defunct Massachusetts’ pre-K-12 state standards – regarded to be among the best in the nation⁸ – said the CCSS emphasis on informational and non-fiction texts is misguided, and that not only is tackling rich literature the best way to prepare students for college and careers, but that previously mediocre reading scores can be blamed on the sub-standard young adult literature popular in recent decades.⁹

Throughout 400 years of American education, the aims, according to Terrence Moore, Assistant Professor of History at Hillsdale College, were: truth, knowledge, beauty, and virtue. More stresses that what is being lost under the CCSS is the most important value of literature itself: “how to be more human.”¹⁰

The CCSS rule for elevation of certain texts over others is “text complexity.”¹¹ Those that use more “jargon” are rated higher than those with more simplistic language, putting Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* at a 2nd or 3rd grade level (which currently a lot of students read in high school), while a 2009 New Yorker article on ObamaCare was given a high school complexity rating.¹² In this vein, the CCSS indicate a propensity towards sneaking partisan politics into the classroom.

Additionally, teaching materials aligned with the Standards ask elementary school students to edit such sentences as “(The president) makes sure the laws of the country are fair,” “The wants of an individual are less important than the well-being of the nation,” and “the commands of government officials must be obeyed by all.”¹³ The sentences, which appear in worksheets published by Pearson Education (a company that provides Core-aligned curriculum), are presented both for their substance and form – to teach children how to streamline their writing. The centralist agenda of CCSS is evident not only in the initiative leading to the development and adoption of the standards, but also in the Core-approved materials themselves.

Indeed, as the Standards Initiative is motivated by the readiness to compete in a global economy, it is prudent to remember that the human mind makes jobs; jobs do not make the human mind.¹⁴ Children are not machines to be programmed with data. The insight, curiosity, and human emotion that arise from extensive study of the great works of literature (including, for example, those of Plato, Hans Christen Andersen, and Ben Franklin – none of whom appear on Common Core reading lists) promote intelligent, capable graduates who are able to more readily see empathy and humanity in the global market place, not just in the concepts, ideas, and terms that populate it.

Relatedly, good writing is an art, not a science.¹⁵ As Prof. Moore notes, “Whoever controls the narrative controls the politics, the economics, the family, the ways of thinking and the ways of believing.” Despite the lack of compelling evidence to justify the literature vs. informational text

split, CCSS tells American parents and educators a new narrative — that these standards in English will make for more robust future workers.

Sarah Perry is an attorney with a degree from the University of Virginia School of Law, where she was on the editorial board of the Virginia Journal of International Law. After six years in private practice where she focused on business litigation, commercial document drafting, and business development, Perry took on an adjunct professorship, teaching Business Ethics at the Community College of Baltimore County. After the birth of her first child, she transitioned full time to writing. She currently serves as the Common Core Coalition Manager for the Family Research Council.

Notes:

¹ “Myths vs. Fact,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, accessed April 10, 2014,

<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/>.

² “English Language Arts Standards,” Common Core Standards Initiative, accessed April 10, 2014,

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>.

³ “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, accessed on April 10, 2014,

http://www.corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/ELA_Standards.pdf.

⁴ “English Language Arts Standards > Introduction > Key Design Considerations,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, accessed on April 15, 2014, <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/introduction/key-design-consideration/>.

⁵ Jamie Highfill, an eighth grade teacher from Fayetteville, Arkansas, and a 2011 middle school teacher-of-the-year has had to part with six weeks’ worth of poetry, some short stories, and a popular unit on the legends of King Arthur to make room for essays by Malcolm Gladwell and a chapter from *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell’s book about social behavior. Lyndsey Layton, “Common core sparks war over words,” *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2012, accessed on April 10, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/common-core-state-standards-in-english-spark-war-over-words/2012/12/02/4a9701b0-38e1-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3_story.html.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks,” Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, accessed on April 15, 2014, http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf, p. 13 and p. 177.

⁸ “Sandra Stotsky, Ed.D.,” University of Arkansas: The Department of Education Reform, accessed on April 15, 2014, <http://www.uaedreform.org/sandra-stotsky/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Napp Nazworth, “Common Core Killing Nation’s Great Literature, Scholar Argues,” *The Christian Post*, January 11, 2014, accessed on April 10, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/common-core-killing-nations-great-literature-scholar-argues-112435/>.

¹¹ “Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, accessed on April 15, 2014, http://www.corestandards.org/assets/E0813_Appendix_A_New_Research_on_Text_Complexity.pdf.

¹² Nazworth, “Common Core Killing Nation’s Great Literature,” *The Christian Post*.

¹³ Perry Chiamonte, “Common Core lessons blasted for sneaking politics into elementary classrooms,” Fox News, November 10, 2013, accessed on April 15, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2013/11/10/common-core-lessons-blasted-for-sneaking-politics-into-elementary-classrooms/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Beyond the rules of cogent sentence construction, Anthony Esolen, Professor of Renaissance English Literature at Providence College, notes that CCSS authors apparently believe “we read and write by formula. It is deadly. For writing...cannot be taught by rule. It cannot be divided into component parts, like the levers and hammers of a machine.” Anthony Esolen, “Common Core’s Substandard Writing Standards,” *Crisis Magazine*, November 18, 2013, accessed on April 10, 2014, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/common-cores-substandard-writing-standards>