

5 Things Every Teacher Should be Doing to Meet the Common Core State Standards



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When reading the Common Core State Standards, it's easy to get caught up in the details of each standard. ("Okay, I need to teach compound-complex sentences.") However, it's also important to take a step back and reflect on the big picture. How will the standards change your teaching approaches? How do the standards alter the definition of what it means to be an effective teacher in the 21st century?

The Common Core State Standards highlight five shifts that should be happening in every classroom. Teachers should:

- Lead High-Level, Text-Based Discussions
- Focus on Process, Not Just Content
- Create Assignments for Real Audiences and with Real Purpose
- Teach Argument, Not Persuasion
- Increase Text Complexity

We'll explore each of these items in more detail.

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Lead High-Level, Text-Based Discussions

When you ask students to discuss a text as a whole class or in small groups, make sure that your questions are grounded in the text, and that students refer to the text in their responses. You may wish to begin a discussion by focusing on an author's word choice and then moving to the bigger picture. In *Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy*, David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, two authors of the standards, explain:

You can also ask students for their opinions and personal reactions, but Coleman and Pimentel argue that you should not begin with such an approach.

An effective set of discussion questions might begin with relatively simple questions requiring attention to specific words, details, and arguments and then move on to explore the impact of those specifics on the text as a whole. Good questions will often linger over specific phrases and sentences to ensure careful comprehension and also promote deep thinking and substantive analysis of the text (p.7).

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The Common Core State Standards call for students to demonstrate a careful understanding of what they read before engaging their opinions, appraisals, or interpretations.... Often, curricula surrounding texts leap too quickly into broad and wide-open questions of interpretation before cultivating command of the details and specific ideas in the text (p. 9).

Of course, even if you craft strong questions, you cannot assume that students know how to be effective participants in a class discussion. In *Teaching Critical Thinking*, Terry Roberts and Laura Billings speak about the importance of explicitly teaching speaking and listening skills, which are emphasized in the Common Core. For example, have students set goals before a discussion. Goals might include:

- Speak at least three times
- Agree or disagree with someone else in detail
- Ask a question
- Keep an open mind (Roberts and Billings, p. 21).

After the discussion, you can ask students to assess how they did. Eventually, students will become skilled at holding high-level discussions on their own.

Focus on Process, Not Just Content

Content knowledge obviously matters. However, the Common Core State Standards stress the importance of student discovery. In other words, we cannot merely fill students' heads with content; we should provide them with opportunities to discover information on their own. For example, when teaching vocabulary, we shouldn't ask students to memorize a list of words. Instead, we should engage students in the gathering-information and learning process. Give students the opportunity to really understand the word and connect it to their own lives. "When students make multiple connections between a new word and their own experiences, they develop a nuanced and flexible understanding of the word they are learning" (The Common Core State Standards, Appendix A, p. 32).

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In *Vocabulary at the Center*, Benjamin and Crow describe what discovery-based word study could look like in the classroom:

An example of a meaningful engagement would be for students to create a blog about a topic of interest and carry on an online conversation that is laced with target words. Even if the target words do sound forced, at least the student is combing through the new vocabulary in search of words that actually communicate their ideas (p. 117).

In that activity, students are discovering how words can help them communicate. They are not memorizing a bunch of random words that they will forget days later. They are learning how to learn and use new words, a skill that will stay with them throughout school and beyond.

The Common Core State Standards also emphasize the learning process in relation to research. The standards emphasize “extensive practice with short, focused research projects” (Coleman and Pimentel, p. 11). The purpose of research isn’t just to learn about a topic but to become familiar with the research process itself. Students should “repeat the research process many times and develop the expertise needed to conduct research independently” (Coleman and Pimentel, p. 11). As a result of this repeated practice, students will understand the research process and will be able to carry it out on their own later. Students will become “self-directed learners, effectively seeking out and using resources to assist them, including teachers, peers, and print and digital reference materials” (The Common Core State Standards, Introduction, p. 7).

Create Assignments for Real Audiences and with Real Purpose

The standards emphasize the importance of writing for a variety of audiences. Students should “write routinely over extended time frames...for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (p. 41). Of course, you could teach audience by making up a fake audience each time you assign a project. (“Pretend you’re writing a letter to a chef, asking him to change the menu to suit vegetarians. Pretend you’re giving a speech to the Board of Ed.”) However, if our goal is to prepare students for college and career readiness, why not use real audiences and give students more authentic experiences, like the ones they will have later?

In *Tween Crayons and Curfews*, Heather Wolpert-Gawron discusses the importance of creating assignments that require students to “develop an authentic goal” and use “authentic skills in which to achieve it” (p. 60). For example, at her school, the school bell made an unpleasant noise. The students decided that they wanted the bell to be fixed. They developed a thesis, organized a petition, wrote letters, and prepared an oral statement to be read for the principal and vice principal. Because they were working on a real issue and had to present their findings to real people, they were more motivated to do a good job. In addition, these students are more prepared to write for and present to real audiences in the future.

Teach Argument, Not Persuasion

Some people use the terms *argument* and *persuasion* synonymously; however, the Common Core State Standards draw a distinction between the two. According to Appendix A of the CCSS, persuasive writing might “appeal to the audience’s self-interest, sense of identity, or emotions,” whereas a logical argument “convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer” (p. 24). The following table shows some common elements of each genre.

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Persuasion vs. Argument

| Genre | Definition | Common Features |
|------------|---|--|
| Persuasion | Appeals to the emotions of the audience | Uses techniques such as bandwagon, plain folks, glittering generalities, name calling, and snob appeal |
| Argument | Appeals to logic and reason | Consists of a thesis/claim, evidence, concession/refutation, and a more formal style |

The CCSS favor argument over persuasion because it requires more logic and reason, and is more in line with the kind of writing that students will be expected to do in college. Teachers may wish to rethink the kinds of prompts they assign. For example, instead of asking students to persuade the principal to extend recess, have students write a research-based argument about the importance of recess and physical activity. This is not to say that there isn't a place for persuasion in the classroom. Teaching persuasive techniques such as bandwagon can be useful when doing a media literacy unit and having students analyze advertisements, for example. However, the CCSS ask that teachers make argument a higher priority in the classroom.

Increase Text Complexity

Text complexity is a key aspect of the Common Core State Standards. According to Coleman and Pimentel:

Research makes clear that the complexity levels of the texts students are presently required to read are significantly below what is required to achieve college and career readiness. The Common Core State Standards hinge on students encountering appropriately complex texts at each grade level to develop the mature language skills and the conceptual knowledge they need for success in school and life (p. 3).

Coleman and Pimentel refer to "appropriately complex texts at each grade level." But how can teachers choose texts that are at the right level? Appendix A of the standards recommends that teachers use a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures (p. 8). Don't rely solely on Lexiles or other formulas, even though they seem "official." The formulas are imperfect and do not take subject matter into account. Use your own judgment. Also be careful not to choose material that is too challenging. In *Rigor Made Easy*, Barbara Blackburn stresses the importance of balance:

Look for balance: material should be difficult enough that students are learning something new, but not so hard that they give up. If you like to play tennis, you'll improve if you play against someone who is better than you. But if you play against Venus and Serena Williams, you'll learn less because you are overwhelmed by their advanced skill level (p. 19).

Besides making sure that an individual text is challenging enough, you can also raise the level of content in your classroom by using multiple sources of information. Providing multiple sources on the same topic can help students see a variety of perspectives, and it can help students adjust to texts at varying levels of difficulty.

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After reading the fictional book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, students can read nonfiction online, encyclopedia articles, and/or magazine articles to compare the story to Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights period. You could add another step by reading current newspaper and magazine articles to compare it to Birmingham today, detailing the changes that have occurred (Blackburn, p. 24).

By exposing students to various sources on the same topic, you are adding more depth and perspective to the lesson.

Summary

As you align your curriculum to the Common Core State Standards, don't forget to pause and reflect on the big picture. How are these five shifts happening in your classroom? What have you already been doing well? What would you like to change? Adjusting your lessons to cover the standards will take time and work. Stopping to ask yourself questions along the way can help you achieve success.

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