

Introduction

Getting to the Core of the Curriculum

People can't live with change if there's not a changeless core inside them. The key to the ability to change is a changeless sense of who you are, what you are about and what you value.

—Stephen Covey

Moving Forward—Together

An excellent education should not be an accident; it should be a right, though nowhere in the United States Constitution or any of our other founding documents do we find that right listed. The Common Core State Standards address that omission and challenge us all—administrators and teachers, parents and children, politicians and the public at large, professors and student teachers—to commit ourselves anew to the success of our children and our country.

In my nearly 25 years in education, I have been involved with many of the major efforts to develop standards. I have had the honor of sitting alongside some of our country's greatest educational innovators and leaders to help develop the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for Adolescent Literacy, the National Council of Teachers of English Language Arts Standards, the forthcoming standards for the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, the California Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, and, to the extent that such books serve as a form of national standards, the Holt McDougal 6–12 language arts textbooks. But the Common Core State Standards are different: They come with a level of support, a degree of commitment from leaders at all levels of government and business, and a sense of national urgency that the other efforts could not or cannot claim.

There is a sense that we are all at some crucial inflection point in our national story, one that provides an opportunity we must not squander if our children are to help make this story we are trying to write about our country come true. I am often struck, listening to my mother-in-law, who has lived with us for many years, by her description of the country during the Depression and World War II, both of which she endured while living in the house she now shares with us. Almost any story she tells conveys a sense of shared commitment to the good of the community and country, that vital sense of mission that they were all in it together, even—or especially—when the work was difficult and demanded some sacrifice.

It is not just the country and students that stand to benefit from the Common Core, however; one of the “more profound implications will be that the Common Core reading standards, [for example,] can deepen the reading skills of adults as well. . . . There is some work here that has the potential to take teachers as well as students to new places,” argue Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman in their book *Pathways to the Common Core*:

Accelerating Achievement (2012, p. 88). It is this same sense of mutual benefit that Carol Jago (2005) calls to mind in her allusion to the old U.S. Navy watchword of “one hand for the ship, one hand for yourself” (p. 101), for everything I have done to better understand and implement the Common Core standards has only made me more aware of my teaching, and improved it, by making it more “*intentional* [and challenging me to] establish an environment conducive for learning by setting objectives, reinforcing effort, and providing recognition” (Kendall, 2011, p. 28).

Arthur Applebee (in press), writing about the Common Core State Standards, offered a detailed analysis of the Common Core that illustrates and confirms “that aligning our teaching to the CCSS does not mean we need to abandon all that we have learned about effective curriculum and instruction.” Applebee spends much of this journal article analyzing lessons from my own class, which I described in *What’s the Big Idea? Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking* (Burke, 2010). In his analysis, Applebee notes the following:

Burke’s lessons are quite overtly aligned to standards (the California standards in place at the time, rather than the CCSS, which came later). Rather than teaching to the tests, these lessons focus on engaging students in cognitively and linguistically challenging tasks in the course of which they will gain the knowledge and skills that the standards require.

Units with the richness and imagination of those that Burke describes in *What’s the Big Idea?* reflect a coming together of the wisdom of practice with the best of current research and theory on the teaching of English language arts. Such teaching does not offer the simple prescriptions that guide classrooms that focus curriculum and instruction more directly on the standards and the tests that accompany them. But the paradox is that by not teaching to the test, students in classrooms like Burke’s will do better on tests in general, and at the same time develop the knowledge and skills to do well in other contexts of schooling, life and work. And schools will be much more interesting places to be, for teachers and students alike.

A Brief Orientation to *The Common Core Companion: The Standards Decoded, Grades 6–8*

One cannot, however, benefit from or use a document that demands more time than a teacher or administrator has each day; thus, I seek here to share with you, my fellow educators, the reformatted, parallel version of the standards I created first for myself to make the document more efficient, more usable, and more *helpful* as I plan my lessons every evening, write my books, or prepare the workshops I give around the country to help administrators and teachers better understand what these standards say, what they mean, and what such instruction looks like.

This process will, inevitably, take us all, regardless of our role, through three stages, perhaps repeated several times in the next few years leading up to and following the actual exams that will assess students’ mastery of the standards: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.

As is true for all of us, administrators have come to the job of leading with their sense of what their role is or should be; past experience, along with their training and education, has given them this orientation. Now administrators and teachers such as yourself find their role being redefined, the demands on them and their time being dramatically restructured, often in ways that cause some sense of disorientation, as if all your previous experience, all your knowledge, was suddenly suspect, leaving you to navigate this new era without a working compass. Eventually, as we know, we get our bearings, find the star by which we might chart our course, and realize that much of what we already know and value does still, in fact, apply to the task at hand, that it certainly need not be tossed overboard.

What I offer you here is a compass of sorts to help you—whether you are an administrator or teacher, department chair or district curriculum supervisor, a professor or a student teacher training to join us in this richly rewarding enterprise called education—understand and make better use of the standards themselves. Here you will find several features I have designed and refined with the help of many teachers, curriculum supervisors, and superintendents with whom I have met and worked around the country in recent years.

Key features, each developed with you in mind, include the following:

A one-page overview of all the anchor standards. Designed for quick reference or self-assessment, this one-page document offers all users a one-stop place to see all the English Language Arts Common Core Standards. In addition to using this to quickly check the Common Core anchor standards, you might also consider having the whole faculty or members of a group or department self-assess themselves to determine which standards they know and are addressing effectively and which ones they need to learn and teach.

Side-by-side anchor standards translation. The Common Core State Standards College Readiness Anchor Standards for each category—reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language—appear in a two-page spread with the original Common Core anchor standards on the left and, on the right, their matching translations in language that is more accessible to those on the run or new to literacy instruction.

A new user-friendly format for each standard. Instead of the four reading standard domains—literature, informational, social studies, and science and technical subjects—spread throughout the Common Core State Standards document, here you will find the first reading standard for grades 6–8 and the four different domains, for example, all on one page. This allows you to use *The Common Core Companion* to see at a glance what Reading Standard 1 looks like in grades 6–8 across different text types and subject areas, but also, equally important, shows you what that same informational text standard looks like across grade levels from 6–8 to be sure your curriculum honors the challenge to increase complexity as students move from grade to grade.

Parallel translation/what students do. Each standard opens to a two-page spread that has the original Common Core standards on the left (all gathered on that one page for each standard) and a parallel translation of each standard mirrored on the right in more accessible language (referred to on these pages as the “Gist”) so you can concentrate on how to *teach* the Common Core State Standards instead of how

to understand them, for while they are admirably concise in their original form, they are, nonetheless, remarkably dense texts once you start trying to grasp exactly what they say. These Gist pages align themselves with the original Common Core, so you can move between the two without turning a page as you think about what they mean and how to teach them. Also, beneath each translation of a standard appears a brief but carefully developed list of questions you can teach your students to ask as a way for them to meet that standard. These are meant to be very practical questions students can ask themselves or which you, in the course of teaching them, can pose. Note also that the more advanced requirements added to the grades 6–8 standards are **bolded** for emphasis, quick reference, and ease of use.

Instructional techniques/what the teacher does. These methods and activities, based on current literacy research, offer teachers across subject areas specific, if concise, suggestions for how to teach that specific Common Core standard, the activities specifically linked to the exact wording and demands of the standard.

Academic vocabulary: key words and phrases. Each standard comes with a unique glossary since words used in more than one standard have a unique meaning in each. Any word or phrase that seemed a source of possible confusion is defined in some detail.

Planning notes/teaching notes. Each standard offers two pages designed to give you a place to transition your curriculum over to these new standards, or to make notes about what to teach and how. These pages can serve as a place to capture ideas for yourself or for grade-level teams, departments, schools, and district curriculum offices or for students, teachers, and their professors in a methods class at the university. They can also be copied for additional planning.

How to Use This Book

As each school or department has its own culture, I am reluctant to say what you should do or how you should use *The Common Core Companion*. Still, a few ideas suggest themselves, which you should adapt, adopt, or avoid as you see fit:

- Provide all teachers in a department or school with a copy to establish a common text to work from and refer to throughout your Common Core planning work and instructional design work.
- Bring your *Common Core Companion* to all meetings for quick reference or planning with colleagues in the school or your department or grade level team.
- Use your *Companion* to aid in the transition from what you were doing to what you will be doing, treating the planning pages that accompany each standard as a place to note what you do or which Common Core State Standard corresponds with one of your district or state standards you are trying to adapt to the Common Core.
- Begin or end meetings with a brief but carefully planned sample lesson or instructional connection, asking one or more colleagues in the school or department to present and lead a discussion of how it might apply to other classes, grade levels, or subject areas.
- Use the *Companion* in conjunction with your professional learning community (PLC) to add further cohesion and consistency between all your ideas and plans.

12 Recommended Common Core Resources

1. **The Common Core State Standards Home Page**
www.corestandards.org
2. **Council of Chief State School Officers**
www.ccsso.org
3. **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers**
www.parcconline.org
4. **Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium**
www.smarterbalanced.org/k-12-education/common-core-state-standards-tools-resources
5. **National Association of Secondary School Principals**
www.nassp.org/knowledge-center/topics-of-interest/common-core-state-standards
6. **Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development**
www.ascd.org/common-core-state-standards/common-core.aspx
7. **engage^{ny} (New York State Department of Education)**
engageny.org
8. **California Department of Education Resources for Teachers and Administrators**
www.cde.ca.gov/re/cc
9. **National Dissemination Center for Children With Disabilities**
nichcy.org/schools-administrators/commoncore
10. **Edutopia Resources for Understanding the Common Core**
www.edutopia.org/common-core-state-standards-resources
11. **Common Core Curriculum Maps**
commoncore.org/maps
12. **Teach Thought: 50 Common Core Resources for Administrators and Teachers**
www.teachthought.com/teaching/50-common-core-resources-for-teachers

Accepting the Invitation

When I began teaching in the late 1980s, I asked my new department chair what I would be teaching. He smiled and handed me a single sheet of paper with a list of titles on it and wished me luck (always making time to help me if I had questions). Years later, many districts, mine included, had thick binders, binders so heavy with so many standards that they were all ignored since they did not come with the time to read and think about how to teach them. Now we have the Common Core State Standards, which come just as a large group of teachers will retire, leaving an equally large group of new teachers feeling a bit up the river without a paddle, as the saying goes. This book is meant to be that oar, or a map you or your faculty or colleagues can use to guide you through the curriculum (which derives from the words *current* and *course*).

These standards offer me a view of the territory I have crossed to arrive here, having been the first in my family to graduate from college. In a section titled “A Country Called School” from my book *School Smarts: The Four Cs of Academic Success* (Burke, 2004), I wrote of my experience of being a student:

Learning is natural; schooling is not. Schools are countries to which we send our children, expecting these places and the people who work there to help draw out and shape our children into the successful adults we want them to become. As with travel to other countries, however, people only truly benefit from the time spent there to the extent that they can and do participate. If someone doesn’t know the language, the customs, the culture—well, that person will feel like the outsider they are. As Gerald Graff, author of *Clueless in Academe* (2003) puts it, “schooling takes students who are perfectly street-smart and exposes them to the life of the mind in ways that make them feel dumb” (p. 2).

This is precisely how I felt when I arrived at college. I lacked any understanding of the language. The culture of academics confused me. The conventions that governed students’ behaviors and habits were invisible to me. Those who thrived in school seemed to have been born into the culture, have heard the language all their life, and knew inherently what mattered, what was worth paying attention to, how much effort was appropriate. Teachers somehow seemed to expect that we all came equipped with the same luggage, all of which contained the necessary tools and strategies that would ensure our success in their classes and, ultimately, school. It wasn’t so. (Burke 2004, p. 1)

When I enrolled in a community college all those years ago, I was placed in a remedial writing class, highlighted whole chapters of textbooks, and had no idea what to say or how to enter class discussions. School extended an invitation to me then that I did not know at first how to accept, so disoriented was I by its demands. The Common Core State Standards extend a similar invitation—and challenge—to all of us, teachers and administrators, and all others engaged in the very serious business of educating students. It is an invitation I have already accepted on behalf of my students and myself.

Reading these standards, I am reminded of a passage from a wonderful book by Magdalene Lampert (2001) titled *Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching*. In that book, she has a chapter titled “Teaching Students to Be People Who Study in School,” in which she says of students not unlike the one I was and many of those I teach:

Some students show up at school as “intentional learners”—people who are already interested in doing whatever they need to do to learn academic subjects—they are the exception rather than the rule. Even if they are disposed to study, they probably need to learn how. But more fundamental than knowing how is developing a sense of oneself as a learner that makes it socially acceptable to engage in academic work. The goal of school is not to turn all students into people who see themselves as professional academics, but to enable all of them to include a disposition toward productive study of academic subjects among the personality traits they exhibit while they are in the classroom. If the young people who come to school do not see themselves as learners,

they are not going to act like learners even if that would help them to be successful in school. It is the teacher's job to help them change their sense of themselves so that studying is not a self-contradictory activity. (Lampert, 2001, p. 265)

Lampert's statement goes to the core of our work as teachers and these standards, as well. The work ahead will be difficult, as nearly all important work is, for it often asks more of us than we knew we had to give, yet doing the work will give us the strength we need to succeed in the future we are called to create for ourselves and our country. The word "education" stems from the Latin word *educare*, meaning to draw out that which is within, to lead. This is what we must do. I offer you this book to help you do that work, and wish you all the strength and patience your two hands can hold.

References

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- Burke, J. (2004). *School smarts: The four Cs of academic success*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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- Jago, C. (2005). *Papers, papers, papers: An English teacher's survival guide*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kendall, J. (2011). *Understanding common core state standards*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Lampert, M. (2001). *Teaching problems and the problems of teaching*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Quick Reference: Common Core State Standards, 6–12 English Language Arts

Reading

Key Ideas and Details

1. 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 the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes*

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Speaking and Listening

Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Language

Conventions of Standard English

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Knowledge of Language

3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
6. Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

Source: Designed by Jim Burke. Visit www.englishcompanion.com for more information.

Note: For the complete Common Core standards document, please visit corestandards.org.

*These broad types of writing include many subgenres. See Appendix A for definitions of key writing types.

Quick Reference: Common Core State Standards, 6–12 English Language Arts in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

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Key Ideas and Details

1. 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 the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

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