

Introduction

When the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were first introduced in 2010, I thought, “Good grief! Here we go again.” I’ll be blunt: I disliked the state standards that were instituted, partially, in response to No Child Left Behind. These state-based standards and assessments left many of us with long lists of expectations that were fixed on the lowest rank of Bloom’s Taxonomy—the knowledge, or recall, level. Not surprisingly, after more than a decade of using this framework we find the nation’s students largely unprepared for the demands of college and twenty-first-century careers.

Nevertheless, I had to reevaluate the validity of the Common Core when I discovered on page four of the CCSS document something to convince me that the Common Core standards were different:

Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.

There it was, in black and white. Educators—teachers and curriculum specialists—were being credited for their judgment, experience, and skills. *Teachers*, not policy-makers, were charged with identifying the most appropriate methods for meeting goals. While this approach may seem like common sense, it was something that I hadn’t heard in years.

The CCSS framework, adopted by all but four states as of January 2014, offers a coherent paradigm that helps teachers develop effective classroom environments. In these classrooms, all students will be able to receive the high level of instruction needed to prepare them for the future.

Three key features of the CCSS raise the expectations placed on students:

- 1. Literacy.** Literacy is a foundational feature of the Common Core. The authors of the CCSS promote the idea that if students are to be college and career ready, they must understand a variety of challenging texts. Further, to facilitate this goal, literacy skills must be taught by teachers of all content areas, not just English language arts. The literacy standards are divided into four strands: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language.
- 2. Reading complexity.** The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for reading are divided into three areas: key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas. Within each area, students are expected to achieve certain levels of reading complexity and comprehension in order to be ready for college or careers.
- 3. Conceptual understanding.** The mathematics standards promote conceptual understanding as well as procedural skill. It’s not enough for students to solve equations; they must take the information and apply it on a conceptual level.

The CCSS represent a significant challenge for educators and schools. The standards demand that we shift from merely conveying information. Instead, we are now free to engage students in the more sophisticated thought processes of analysis and synthesis.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE COMMON CORE

The Common Core State Standards were written in response to the first round of standards, developed in the 1990s by individual states. Assessments that measure this early round of state-specific standards have made it difficult to compare students across the country. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been our only reliable, nationwide measure of student achievement. During the past decade, NAEP results have revealed substantial differences among states in all content areas—but particularly in literacy. The CCSS address this problem by providing educators with not only a coherent set of expectations for literacy skill development (and other content areas), but also a more uniform understanding of student performance and academic achievement. In addition, the standards and assessments are intended to create a common language among educators that will, in turn, lead to shared conversation and a common commitment to preparing students for college and careers. The following eight key elements form the main focus areas of the CCSS:

1. High-level comprehension
2. Challenging texts, with greater emphasis on informational texts
3. Technology-based resources
4. Expository and argumentative writing
5. Oral language skills (speaking and listening)
6. Academic language and vocabulary
7. College and career readiness
8. Literacy skills in *all* content areas

The Common Core State Standards increase the expectations for student literary achievement in various ways. The central focus of the new standards is ***comprehension***. For students to be college and career ready, they must be able to understand a wide variety of challenging texts. Students are expected to engage in careful reading of both main ideas and details, perceiving how the information is organized, recognizing and evaluating the author’s craft, synthesizing a variety of texts, and responding critically to these texts. These are all high-level comprehension skills.

The CCSS also establish an expectation that students will read more difficult texts than they currently do. This is in response to NAEP data that indicates more than 60 percent of students are not proficient readers. In order for students to develop high-level reading skills, they must engage in reading ***complex yet accessible texts***. Differentiated texts and increased content-area reading are essential as we position students to meet these more rigorous expectations.

The Common Core State Standards pay significantly greater attention to informational texts than did previous generations of standards. With the greater focus on informational texts, we now have a broader range of materials that can develop literacy skills in diverse content areas. When students read a wide variety of texts that includes a strong focus on **informational texts**, they are developing their skills in reading to build knowledge.

The CCSS also recognize that the ways in which information is communicated in the twenty-first century is dramatically new and different. Students are expected to use a range of digital resources, visual and graphic information, and other **technology-based resources** to build their knowledge. And these resources are to be used not only for gathering new information, but also for presenting this information to others.

To support students' acquisition of presentation skills, the Common Core writing standards represent a dramatic shift from extensive personal narratives to **expository and argumentative writing**. Students are expected to glean vast knowledge through encounters with a full array of texts. Then they are expected to represent what they know and understand through writing.

Speaking and listening are oftentimes referred to as neglected or forgotten literacies. In contrast, the CCSS embrace the value of **oral language**. Like reading and writing, speaking and listening are literacies that enable students to gather new information and present what they know and understand.

The CCSS also include a language strand that widens the scope beyond a focus on mechanics. The language strand incorporates expectations for **academic language and vocabulary** in both written and oral communication, while also covering grammar and usage conventions and knowledge of how language functions in different contexts.

As we transition to the CCSS we must remember that the emphasis is on skill building for **college and career readiness**. Our twenty-first-century students can gather information from a staggering number of sources, but they still need to learn how to use this information. The literacy skills they develop in school should provide the means to do so.

A core element of CCSS that helps students prepare for college and career readiness is building literacy skills in *all content areas*. The new CCSS-based assessments developed by the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium require broad literacy skills that are not exclusive to English language arts (ELA). Literacy skills are the responsibility of all teachers, not just the English language arts teachers. This is why the ELA standards include interdisciplinary literacy standards. When I work with teachers all over the country in examining the assessment examples from PARCC and from Smarter Balanced, math teachers are quick to point out that the students who do not have excellent reading skills will be unable to respond to the more complex and application-based problems that are now the norm for CCSS assessments.

MYTHS AND REALITIES SURROUNDING THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Since the CCSS were introduced in 2010, I have encountered many rumors and misunderstandings about these new standards. I'd like to set the record straight regarding some of the myths.

Myth #1: The CCSS were a federal mandate.

Actually, the Common Core State Standards initiative is a state-led effort coordinated jointly by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and by the Council of Chief State School Officers.

Myth #2: Educators were not involved in the development of the CCSS.

That's not true. The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and experts to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare students for college and careers.

Myth #3: The CCSS do not address the needs of students with special needs.

Well, I can see how this rumor got started. In the introduction of the CCSS document, the authors indicate that it is teachers and curriculum specialists who know best how students can develop the skills articulated in the new standards. Therefore, the document does not include recommendations for students with special needs. Nor do the standards recommend specific curriculum or instructional methodologies. Instead, individual school districts and states are given the freedom to determine how to best meet the needs of students with special needs.

Myth #4: The CCSS do little to address the achievement gap.

The CCSS place the trust in teachers and curriculum specialists to make instructional decisions. Specific strategies or methods are not listed in the CCSS, because they are based on the professional reality that educators are in the best position to know what will actually work to meet the instructional needs and achievement gaps of the students in a given classroom. The CCSS emphasize results rather than means. As such, their purpose is to lay out the expectations and skills needed for college and career readiness, not the curriculum and instructional means by which these expectations are met.

Myth #5: With all of the focus on college and career readiness, the CCSS ignore the immediate developmental needs of students.

Similar to my response to Myth #4, the CCSS emphasize that educators, not policymakers, know best how to develop the skills that are articulated in the standards. The transition to the Common Core State Standards and their rigorous expectations is a process that takes time to implement. The anchor standards and grade-level articulations are vertically and horizontally aligned, which means that students at different ability levels are working on the same skill but at different levels of competency. Thus, instruction must meet the current needs of students.

Myth #6: Differentiated instruction is mandated by the CCSS.

Again, the CCSS authors do not mandate or make suggestions for any particular curriculum or instructional methodology. Why? The CCSS recognize, quite emphatically, that it is teachers and curriculum specialists who are the most knowledgeable about the abilities of students in any given educational context.

Myth #7: We aren't allowed to teach literature anymore.

This is not true. In the CCSS Appendices, the authors clearly explain that there should be a *balance* between literature and informational text. Of all the myths I encounter, I find this one the most frustrating. The role of informational text in the CCSS English language arts curriculum is so misunderstood that I feel compelled to address it further.

Literary Nonfiction vs. Informational Texts

The CCSS are based on recommendations from the National Reading Panel that are rooted in research. For the ELA standards, informational texts are defined as “literary nonfiction,” which can include biographies, memoirs, letters, speeches, or diaries. For all other content areas, informational texts include textbooks, blogs, news articles, and other reference materials. This distinction is critical, and is illustrated in the following excerpt from the CCSS ELA document:

FIGURE i.1:
LITERATURE VS.
INFORMATIONAL
TEXT IN THE
COMMON CORE

From *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, 6–12*, p. 57. Copyright © 2010. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.

Range of Text Types for Grades 6–12

Students in grades 6–12 apply the Reading standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods.

Literature		
Stories	Drama	Poetry
Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels	Includes one-act and multi-act plays, both in written form and on film	Includes the subgenres of narrative poems, lyrical poems, free verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics
Informational Text		
Literary Nonfiction		
Includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience		

As we consider the role of informational text, it must be within the context of the entire school curriculum, *including all content areas other than English language arts*. For example, when we discuss percentages of literature and informational text to be read at each grade level, we’re talking about all classes in a schoolwide curriculum. English language arts is just one of many courses. Literature (both fiction and literary nonfiction) is still, and always will be, the primary emphasis in an English language arts course. From a reading instructional perspective, literature helps

students develop high-level comprehension skills because of its inferential meanings, figurative language, and linguistic complexity. Informational texts (excluding literary nonfiction) characteristically do not contain these features. Therefore, while some informational texts are still read in ELA courses, they also need to be read in courses other than ELA.

The point of the CCSS reading framework is best summarized in Reading Anchor Standard 10, in which students are expected to “*read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.*” The reading standards are not so much about percentages of literature and informational text within the curriculum, but rather about increasing the overall amount of reading.

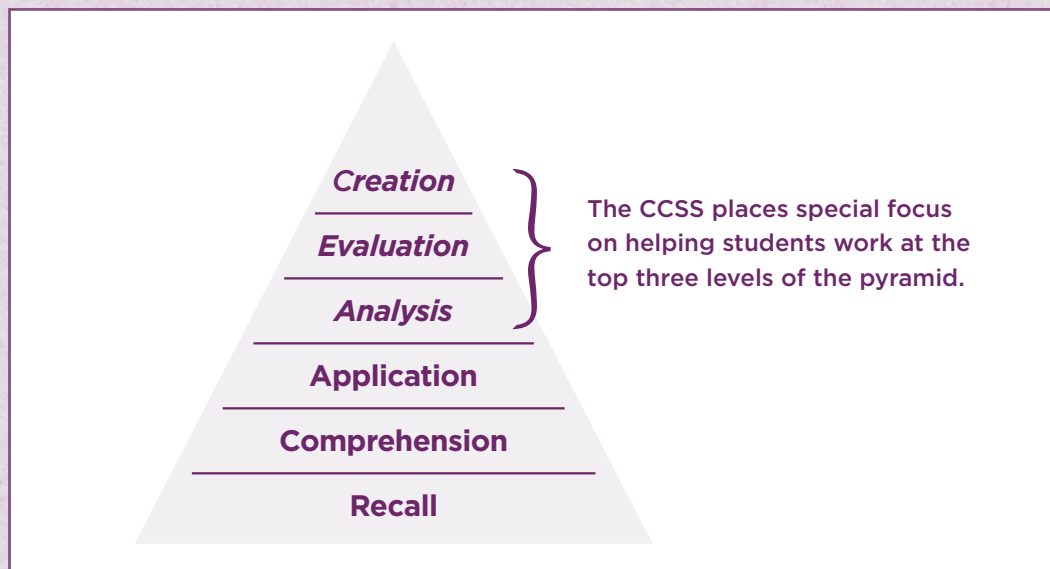
ABOUT THIS BOOK

Now that we’ve addressed the “why” of the new standards, their construction, and what they mean for students, we need to address the “how.” How can teachers meet the expectations for skill development called for in the new standards? There is no quick answer to this question; I’ll begin with some background.

My first experience working with teachers transitioning to CCSS was back in 2011. At that time, few educators were aware of the paradigm shifts created by the CCSS and what it would mean for teachers and students. As we designed a curriculum aligned to the new CCSS for mathematics and English language arts, we included research-based methods in our plans to teach the new curriculum. Some of the methods we used included project-based learning, learning centers, reader’s workshop, and writer’s workshop. As we dug deeply into the new standards, we discovered that students must work at the highest levels on Bloom’s Taxonomy in order to develop content knowledge and literacy skills (see **Figure i.2**). As you examine the standards, you’ll notice high-level skills such as analysis, synthesis, comparing and contrasting, and representation. These carefully worded expectations transition students to the highest level of knowledge and understanding.

FIGURE i.2:
BLOOM’S
TAXONOMY AND
THE COMMON
CORE STATE
STANDARDS

Based on Anderson, L., and
D. Krathwhol, eds., 2001



After creating a math and ELA curriculum aligned with CCSS, I worked further with educators to develop a set of tools that would support teachers as they gain an understanding of the new standards. Most of the tools were fleshed out during professional development days, or during sustained professional learning communities (PLCs)—those regular meetings that give teachers the opportunity to work together to build professional knowledge. Since 2011, these tools have been used by thousands of teachers and school administrators throughout the United States. They have been used successfully in a wide variety of educational contexts. Each tool has been revised as a result of substantial teacher feedback. This book became a reality in response to many teacher requests for its publication.

The Common Sense Guide to the Common Core contains forty tools designed to help teachers, administrators, and their colleagues develop a plan for implementing the new standards. Each tool is described in depth; often it is accompanied by a figure of the tool filled in with sample text or labeled with annotations. The tools themselves are presented as full-page graphic organizers following the tool description and example tool, if applicable. They can be duplicated, filled in on the page, or printed from the digital download for use in professional development and curriculum planning groups. (See page ix for instructions on how to access the digital download.) The following paragraphs summarize the content and tools addressed in each chapter of this book.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Common Core State Standards. The starting point for transitioning to the CCSS is a thorough reading of the document. The tools in Chapter 1 are packed with important information and resources that will support you and your colleagues as you transition to the new standards.

Chapter 2: Analyzing Your Current Standards and Curriculum. The best advice I have ever heard an educator share with colleagues as they prepare to embark on CCSS implementation is: “Don’t throw out your current curriculum!” You probably already have instructional practices in place that are Common Core aligned. The tools in this chapter will guide you through a thorough study and audit of your current curriculum as you and your colleagues identify areas that may need revision for CCSS alignment.

Chapter 3: Transitioning to the Common Core. Any transition requires a great plan. The tools in this chapter focus on building curriculum that develops the skills articulated in the CCSS, while deepening student content knowledge.

Chapter 4: Meeting the Expectations of the Common Core. The CCSS is about college and career readiness. Classroom practices that foster independent learning and thinking are critical to developing college and career readiness skills. The tools in this chapter are designed to support your understanding and application of a focus and instructional practices that center on students.

Chapter 5: Addressing Text Complexity and Vocabulary. The CCSS establish the expectation that students need to read increasingly complex texts independently. As students engage in more complex texts, one of their greatest challenges is developing academic vocabulary. The tools in this chapter will develop your understanding of textual complexity and vocabulary in the CCSS.

Chapter 6: Differentiating the Standards. Although the CCSS do not advocate any particular instructional strategy, differentiating instruction is critical. Since the CCSS focuses on skill development, differentiated instruction supports the unique needs of individual learners as they develop skills.

Chapter 7: Schoolwide Common Core. Once you have explored the tools in the previous chapters to develop your understanding of the CCSS, it's time to look at implementation on a large schoolwide or district level. The tools in Chapter 7 support the development of this big picture.

Appendix. Tool #18: The CCSS ELA Grades 3–8 Matrices. For your convenience, I have included these printed graphic organizers for six core grade levels in English language arts. Feel free to fill in or duplicate these pages for use in PLCs and curriculum planning groups. **Important:** *These are only a sampling of available matrices.* A full set of standards matrices is included in the digital download for all grade levels and subject areas. See page ix for instructions on how to access the digital content.

Digital Content. The free downloadable content includes customizable versions of all reproducible forms in the book, along with over 300 pages of fill-in standards matrices for Tools #18–20. See page ix for instructions on how to access the digital content.

Finally, at the back of this book you will find a host of recommended resources on CCSS implementation. Aligning curriculum and instructional practice to the CCSS is a journey. The additional resources and information provide ongoing support in the Common Core era.

All of the reproducible forms in this book are also available as digital files. See page ix for information on how and where to download them.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each educational context is unique. With this in mind, I designed this book to be a collection of resources that can meet the different needs of a variety of educational settings. If your school is just beginning to work with the CCSS, the first step is to examine the CCSS document. The tools in Chapter 1 of *The Common Sense Guide* will lead you through this process, so that you can develop a deep understanding of the standards and the skills that are articulated within. From there, the tools in successive chapters will support you and your colleagues through a curriculum audit as a foundation for Common Core integration and alignment. As you progress through the tools, you and your colleagues will prepare to embark on a plan for assessment, technology, and literacy integration on a schoolwide or districtwide level.

The sequential order of the tools provides a roadmap to understand and apply the CCSS. Feel free, however, to use the tools in whichever order fits your needs best. As you work through the tools, you might discover that some require more attention and in-depth discussion, while others are not needed for your purposes.

Keep in mind that completing all forty tools, or even half of them, as a busy educator, may appear overwhelming and burdensome. Try reviewing all of the tools before digging into any of them separately. Then, estimate how much time you have to devote and which of your needs are the most pressing. Once you've determined your time and priority needs, choose a handful of tools to start out with that feels doable. Do not feel pressured to complete each tool for every subject area, curriculum unit, and grade level you teach. You may find that you only need to use the tool for a couple of units or levels before you “get the hang of it” and are able to simplify the process going forward.

Following are examples of contexts in which you may work with these tools to foster collaboration with various stakeholders.

1. Professional development days. Over the past several years, I've used these tools at professional development workshops in more than twenty-five schools and districts to cultivate and support teachers' understanding of the CCSS.

2. Professional learning communities (PLCs). Two school districts, one in California and the other in Illinois, used each tool in this volume in separate forty- to fifty-minute professional learning community sessions. Through systematic study, teachers transition from learning about standards, to building curriculum, to planning for assessment.

3. Local professional development by administrators and district leaders. Administrators have used these tools with teachers, and district leaders have used them with administrators.

4. University teacher preparation programs. I present the tools in graduate-level teacher preparation classes. As my university students study to become educators, they must develop a thorough understanding of the CCSS and how these standards are compatible with research-based teaching methods.

5. Parents and community. The more parents and community leaders learn about the standards and their implications, the easier it will be to garner political and financial support to secure the resources needed to create twenty-first-century classrooms.

As I sit in front of my computer, you, my teacher colleagues, are on the forefront of my thoughts. I originally created these tools as part of my work in helping schools transition to the new standards. The actual CCSS document is packed with information, while *The Common Sense Guide to the Common Core* breaks down that information into smaller, usable chunks. My sole hope is that this resource will aid your work in the classroom.

Katherine S. McKnight, Ph.D.

Feel free to contact me through my website: www.katherinemcknight.com.

Chapter 7

Schoolwide Common Core

In addition to my work with teacher colleagues, I also present to and teach administrators about the Common Core. Frequently, administrators will ask my advice about transitioning to the CCSS on a schoolwide level. The five planning tools in this chapter reflect my advice for a schoolwide transition, in addition to the information included in Tool #13 on page 47.

Once you have completed these five planning tools—a process that often takes longer than just one school year—the seeds for a successful transition will have been planted. Your school will be on its way toward curriculum and instruction that is more aligned with the expectations of the CCSS, and quality, research-based instruction will happen.

TOOL #36: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PLANNER

In order to transition successfully to the CCSS, teachers must have regular time to develop the curriculum and materials to meet the fidelity of the new standards. Provide teachers with regularly structured opportunities to work collaboratively and to address curriculum instruction and assessment issues. Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer a powerful way for educators to come together to discuss strategies and plans for curriculum and instruction within the school community. Tool #36 (page 111 and Figure 7.1) provides a template that is based on the tools in this book. It will assist you and the professional learning community (PLC) in creating a plan for the full academic year. The PLC Planner is designed for educators to plan for professional development and discussions.

FIGURE 7.1:
EXAMPLE
TOOL #36



EXAMPLE TOOL #36: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY PLANNER

Tool #	Tool Name	Suggested Timeframe During the Year
1–2	Close Reading and Examination of the CCSS	Work in content-specific teams in the first month of school or during professional development days prior to the start of the school year. Extend to professional development days in October.
3–4	Foundational Features of the CCSS	
5	Understanding Academic Language in the CCSS	
6	Fulcrum and Focus Standards	
7	Identifying Paradigm Shifts	
8	Comparing the Standards in the CCSS	
9	Gap Analysis	
10	Curriculum Audit	
11–12	Curriculum Strengths and Weaknesses	
13	Schoolwide Transition Plan	Begin in January in PLCs
14	Identifying Needs while Transitioning	
15–16	Mapping Curriculum	
17	Compatible Curriculum Design for the CCSS	
18–20	Sample Standards Matrices	Begin in March in PLCs
21	Student-Centered Learning	
22	Project-Based Learning 101	
23	Writing Great Essential Questions	
24	Basics of Argumentation	
25	Evaluating Online Resources	
26	What Is Text Complexity?	Summer professional development
27	Constructing a Reading List That Builds Text Complexity	
28–30	Academic Vocabulary	Begin in Year 1; continue to Year 2
31	Aligning Differentiated Instruction with the CCSS	
32	Differentiated Instruction Checklist	
33	Creating Differentiated Text Sets	
34	Pump Up the Standard: Sophisticated Complexity	
35	Ramp Up the Standard: Acceleration	
36	Professional Learning Community Planner	
37	School Technology Implementation Planner	
38	School Literacy Planner	Begin in Year 1; continue to Year 2 Teacher committee with principal
39	Formative Assessment Planner	
40	Master Assessment Schedule	



Tool #	Tool Name	Suggested Timeframe During the Year
1-2	Close Reading and Examination of the CCSS	
3-4	Foundational Features of the CCSS	
5	Understanding Academic Language in the CCSS	
6	Fulcrum and Focus Standards	
7	Identifying Paradigm Shifts	
8	Comparing the Standards in the CCSS	
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