

The Vermont Writing Collaborative. *Writing for Understanding*. Vermont: Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2008. Print.

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Preface
Writing for Understanding and the
Common Core Standards:
What's the Connection?

In 2010, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts and Literacy, as well as Mathematics, were released to the public. Initiated by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors' Association and extensively reviewed by states, the Standards were created to raise the rigor of what is expected from students and teachers in a consistent way across the states. In the words of the Common Core, these standards attempt to "fulfill the charge issued by the states to create the *next generation* of K-12 standards in order to help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school."

Why are new standards needed? In brief, because too many students are leaving high school unprepared for the literacy demands of the community college, college, university, or workplace. Too many students cannot independently read, make sense of, or make discerning judgments about demanding and complex text (especially informational and literary nonfiction); too many students cannot write clearly to show their understanding and reasoning,

and use evidence and information to do so; too many students cannot listen thoughtfully and carefully; and too many students cannot express themselves clearly and cogently.

The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy are designed to address these problems. They point out clearly and forcefully that, in order to be competent and capable adults, our students must be able to think critically, read analytically and write clearly. The Standards lay out a carefully described framework for what it will take at each grade level in terms of literacy instruction so that, by the end of high school, virtually all students are well-prepared for education beyond high school, be it college, the workplace, or the military.

It is beyond the scope of this preface to take an exhaustive look at the standards. What we can point out here is that the goal of the Common Core Standards and the goal of Writing for Understanding are nearly identical. Writing for Understanding provides a proven and practical approach for addressing the Common Core ELA Standards in every teacher's classroom—so that every student is deeply literate, and every student is prepared for the world he encounters.

What are the Common Core Standards trying to accomplish?

Broadly, the Standards themselves state,

“As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature.

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They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic” (p. 3).

These Common Core Standards, lofty as their goal may seem, are premised on the understanding that at the heart of these goals is the ability of students to read and write well and thoughtfully, to listen carefully and discerningly, to speak clearly, and to think critically. If we as educators do not make these priorities, we cannot hope to reach all our students—the strugglers as well as the quick learners, the children from poverty as well as the children of advantage.

It is, after all, a matter of equity: what will happen to these individual students if we fail them? It is also a matter of practicality: what will happen to our nation if so many of our students cannot meet the demands of college and the workplace?

What do the Common Core Standards emphasize?

Key aspects of the Standards include:

- **an emphasis on complex text for *all students***

Texts can be appropriately complex in many ways, including vocabulary, length and structure of sentences, and sophistication of ideas. Reading and making meaning from increasingly complex text, both literary and informational, is at the heart of the Common Core Standards. Rich and complex text itself reflects deep, often nuanced knowledge

on the part of the writer – being able to do the hard work to grapple with it successfully on the part of the reader is a huge part of what it means to be a “literate person in the twenty-first century”.

- **an emphasis on integrated literacy**

Reading, writing, speaking and listening cannot be separated and still be effectively taught. Writing is taught in the context of reading and discussing complex text; literacy instruction overall is shared by everyone within the school. With the depth of the Common Core Standards, and the emphasis on authentically complex text of all types, this integration cannot be lip service. It must be actual, it must be significant, and it must be sustained.

- **an emphasis on building strong and deep content knowledge**

Literacy is not fragmented; rather, it is the result of consistent, purposeful attention on the part of teachers and curriculum to building a strong and deep “base of knowledge over a wide range of subject matter”. This is the opposite of the “today we’re reading about dinosaurs, tomorrow about tomatoes” approach to text. Instead, it recognizes that students will learn to read well and deeply only if they are given the opportunity to build strong and deep domains of knowledge and understanding that matter.

- **an emphasis on expository, text-based writing**

The Standards do include narrative writing in some form at all grade levels. However, the majority of the writing standards are expository: arguments (what some have called persuasive writing), and informative / explanatory, especially by middle and high school but even at younger grades. This

is writing that is consistently evidence-based, with evidence coming from working with rich text and other rich materials in various ways, and thinking about it honestly and critically. It is also writing that demonstrates deep understanding of and clear thinking about its subject.

So, what's the connection to *Writing for Understanding*?

Writing for Understanding is premised on the understanding that writing well is ultimately about making meaning thoughtfully, and communicating that meaning clearly. When a piece of writing is effective, at any grade level, it is a *coherent chunk of meaning* to both the writer and the reader.

Writing for Understanding recognizes that no student (nor anyone else, for that matter) can write effectively if she does not have solid knowledge and understanding about her subject, and does not have a clear structure through which to think about, construct, and communicate that knowledge.

With this in mind, it becomes essential in *Writing for Understanding* for teachers to plan intentionally—to have a clear idea of what level and type of understanding they want students to be able to show in writing, and then to plan for both content understanding, writing knowledge, and structure so that all students—*all students*—are able to write effectively.

Very often, building this knowledge and understanding requires helping students make meaning from rich text. When it does, reading that text cannot be watered down, and it cannot be left to chance. Teachers must help students work with the text purposefully, thoughtfully, thoroughly, even painstakingly - *exactly the sort of reading that the Common Core Standards describe*.

Essentially, building this knowledge and understanding requires deep, rich domain knowledge. One cannot write effectively about something which is minimally, or superficially, or only par-

tially understood. When Writing for Understanding teachers plan for effective writing, they are considering a domain of knowledge about which students need to know.

The size of this domain can and does vary. But what is clear is that when teachers plan so that *all students* can write effectively, they are in effect articulating the domain that students will come to know well, and helping the students synthesize that genuine understanding in clear writing. Again, this is *exactly the sort of writing that the Common Core Standards describe*.

In this book, we describe an integrated approach to teaching writing that emphasizes close reading and critical thinking while at the same time teaching specific skills that will help students become clear and effective writers. Overall, Writing for Understanding recognizes the power of writing as a tool for making meaning. Like the Common Core, we believe that when teachers plan thoughtfully and intentionally so that this power is in the hands of all students, we all – the student herself, and all the rest of us—benefit.