



Core Knowledge Language Arts

Kindergarten – Third Grade Overview

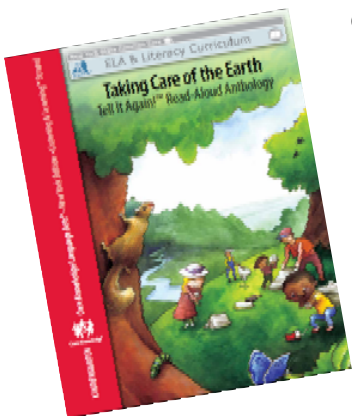
Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) is based on decades of cognitive science research revealing that reading is a two-lock box, a box that requires two keys to open. The first key is decoding skills, which are addressed in the Skills strand of CKLA. The second key is oral language, vocabulary, and background knowledge sufficient to understand what is decoded. These are covered in the Listening & Learning strand. Together, these two strands unlock a lifetime of reading for all children. Using this approach, CKLA not only meets the Common Core standards, it exceeds them.

The Skills strand of CKLA teaches reading and writing in tandem. Children practice blending (reading) and segmenting (spelling) using the sound spellings they have learned. Decodable stories are introduced in the sixth of the 10 units for kindergarten. Stories are 100% decodable—made up entirely of words and sound spellings the students have been taught, or “tricky words” that also have been explicitly taught. Handwriting, spelling, and the writing process are addressed in the Skills strand. The Skills strand was designed to be fully in accord with the findings of the National Reading Panel and it is aligned with the goals put forth in the Reading Foundational Skills section of the Common Core standards.



Decoding is essential, but so is the ability to comprehend what has been decoded—and that depends on vocabulary and content knowledge. The Listening & Learning strand lessons, comprised of teacher read-alouds, class discussions, vocabulary work, and extension activities, build on the research finding that students’ listening comprehension outpaces their reading comprehension throughout elementary school. These read-alouds and exercises are organized in 11 to 12 domains per grade. Each domain is dedicated to a particular topic—such as Taking Care of the Earth, Fighting for a Cause, or Native Americans—and the class stays focused on that topic for 10–15 days of instruction. In addition, the domains are carefully organized to build

on each other within and across grades. This focused, coherent, systematic approach is the most efficient and effective way to build students’ knowledge and vocabulary. It is interesting and engaging too, as the content goes well beyond standard early grades language arts fare to include important historical and scientific events, ideas, and people.



Based on a successful pilot of CKLA in New York City, in which CKLA students out-performed comparison students on all but one measure (and on that one the two groups were equivalent), we are looking forward to CKLA being more and more widely adopted over the next few years. Even though the pilot study was small, with just 10 CKLA schools and 10 comparison schools, it showed exactly what a large body of cognitive science research predicts: Young students can learn to read while also making impressive gains in science and social studies knowledge and vocabulary.¹ Far too many schools focus the early grades on learning to read, assuming they can start building students' academic knowledge and vocabulary in later grades. CKLA shows that with a well-designed program, students can develop the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking while also acquiring knowledge of domains like Early World Civilizations, The Five Senses, Fairy Tales and Tall Tales, Astronomy, The Viking Age, and more.

The underlying philosophy of CKLA is that effective ELA instruction meets the needs of the students in ways that heed two essential findings from cognitive science: decoding (and encoding) must become automatic and fluent, and broad background knowledge and vocabulary are essential to comprehension.

To be child-centered and research-based, CKLA is designed around the following four principles of instruction:



¹ To read about the research foundation for CKLA and to examine the pilot results, please see <http://www.coreknowledge.org/ckla-research-basis>.

1. Explicit instruction in the code is necessary for automatic and effortless decoding.

It is not enough to teach children to be familiar with letters and sounds. To create strong, fluent readers, instruction must help children read words automatically and effortlessly. Explicit instruction in, and extensive practice with, the spelling patterns of the English language is the only way that children can transition from learning to read (in which their mental energy is mostly focused on decoding) to reading to learn (in which, since decoding has become automatic, their mental energy can be devoted to comprehension of more complex texts and topics).



CKLA’s Skills strand organizes children’s reading experiences to maximize their practice in newly taught spelling-sound patterns. This is achieved in two ways. The first is the organization of instruction. A unique database was created to index every word in the English language and determine the most frequent spelling patterns. CKLA organizes instruction to teach the most frequent spelling patterns first in order to maximize the words children can read and move them into engaging, well-written, decodable texts early in the program.

These 100% decodable readers are uniquely designed to provide children intensive practice with the code within an authentic reading experience. They reinforce children’s sense of success as readers by eliminating the distraction of encountering untaught spelling patterns or exceptions. These decodable texts not only engage children in a variety of topics, they are written in the style of chapter-books and inspire children to want to read more.

2. Background knowledge is essential to strong comprehension.

The ability to be a critical and strategic reader depends on having a wide breadth of knowledge and related vocabulary. Comprehension isn’t a transferable skill that can be applied equally well to any text. While reading comprehension strategies are often helpful, the less the reader knows about the topic at hand, the less he or she will grasp from the text.

Building knowledge to build strong comprehension is the core premise of CKLA’s Listening & Learning strand. The Listening & Learning strand provides fiction and nonfiction teacher read-alouds organized within domains of knowledge. There are 11–12 domains a year, each taking 10–15 days of instruction and giving children deep exposure to topics such as Nursery Rhymes and Fables, Seasons and Weather, Presidents and American Symbols, and Light and Sound. The read-alouds in each domain build on each other, and domains within and across grades build on each other. The result is children with surprisingly broad knowledge of literature, science, social studies, and the arts, as well as the ability to comprehend increasingly complex ideas and texts, to make connections and inferences, and to engage in lengthy discussions of the works they are hearing read aloud.

3. Vocabulary learning is most efficient when it is contextualized, content-based, and constant.

There is nothing wrong with studying vocabulary lists—but the sheer number of words that children know clearly demonstrates that most vocabulary is learned in context, by hearing a word many times and thus having many contexts from which to infer its meaning.

The average six year old knows 6,000 words; the average high school graduate knows 40,000 words. Between third and twelfth grades, children learn about 3,000 words a year. Not all these words are known equally well and most of these words are never taught—they are inferred through multiple exposures. Exposure to words that are related to different bodies of knowledge (i.e., domain-specific vocabulary like *photosynthesis* and *couplet*) and exposure to academic words that apply to many topics (e.g., *gravity*, *analyze*, *chorus*, and *trivial*) are both necessary for building a strong vocabulary. Everyday conversations, even classroom conversations, typically contain few of these words. Varied and complex texts on a wide range of topics—fiction and non-fiction—are necessary to provide children the multiple exposures they need to build their vocabulary.

Read-alouds of carefully sequenced texts, which are at the heart of the Listening & Learning strand, are a powerful way to build young children’s vocabulary because they provide multiple exposures to words and the ideas they represent. Even better, the texts are more sophisticated than what the children can read on their own, and the teacher is there to answer questions and foster discussions that get students to use the words they are learning. By hearing complex texts on a coherent and systematically ordered set of topics, children begin connecting words to each other, to words they already know, thus forming an intricate web of words that they will continue to weave their whole lives. These words, and their connections, become children’s mental encyclopedia, allowing them to continually, and ever more easily, access the knowledge they need to understand what they read.

4. *The connection between oral and written language must be supported.*

Although children do transition from learning to read to reading to learn in elementary school, it is not until the end of middle school that students’ reading comprehension is as strong as their listening



comprehension. Even as children become strong readers and writers, there is a benefit to hearing and discussing complex texts that the teacher reads aloud. What is more, reading and writing are not all there is to English language arts—listening and speaking are important too. CKLA’s two-strand model respects all aspects of language development, and is designed to ensure that children become competent in all modes of communication.

To learn more about CKLA, go to www.coreknowledge.org/ckla.
To download CKLA for free, go to www.coreknowledge.org/ckla-files.



The Core Knowledge Language Arts Program

Bibliography

Overall Program Rationale:

Principle: There are two keys to reading comprehension: decoding skills and the ability to understand what you have decoded.

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Skills Strand Rationale:

Principle: Phonics is a more effective way to teach decoding than "whole language" or whole word methods.

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Principle: Synthetic phonics, or linguistic phonics, in which instruction is oriented from sound to letter, is an especially powerful way to teach phonics.

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Principle: Repeated oral reading is a proven method of improving fluency.

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The Core Knowledge Language Arts Program

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Listening and Learning Strand Rationale

Principle: Background Knowledge is crucial for comprehension.

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Principle: Listening comprehension and reading comprehension are closely related, but listening ability outpaces reading ability until middle school.

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Principle: Vocabulary levels are strongly correlated with comprehension.

Relevant Research:

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Principle: Large vocabulary gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children develop in the preschool years.

Relevant Research:

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Principle: Printed language contains a much richer vocabulary than oral language.

Relevant Research:

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Principle: Children can acquire vocabulary from context, by listening to stories read aloud.

Relevant Research:

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Why Knowledge Matters

Resources to Explain the Role of Prior Knowledge in Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking

Videos

“Teaching Content IS Teaching Reading”

By Daniel T. Willingham, Professor of Psychology, University of Virginia

<http://bit.ly/1kkLC0y>

“In order to understand what you’re reading, you need to know something about the subject matter,” notes Willingham. “And that doesn’t just mean that you need to know the vocabulary—you need to have the right knowledge of the world.” There is “truly a mountain of data” demonstrating that content knowledge is essential to comprehension, Willingham says.

“A Tribute to the Work of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.”

By The Thomas B. Fordham Institute

<http://bit.ly/1ha1uUk>

Created for a special conference honoring E. D. Hirsch, Core Knowledge’s founder, this video features prominent education reformers—including David Coleman, Chester E. Finn, Jr., Tom Birmingham, Kati Haycock, and Daniel Willingham—as they reveal why they support more rigorous, cumulative, knowledge-building curriculum.

“Boosting Reading Skills”

By John Merrow, Education Correspondent, *PBS NewsHour*

<http://bit.ly/Scai04>

Merrow visits three schools with different approaches to teaching reading, including P.S. 96, a school in Queens, NY, that uses Core Knowledge Language Arts.

Articles

“How Two Poems Helped Launch a School Reform Movement”

The Atlantic

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities, University of Virginia and Founder, Core Knowledge Foundation

<http://bit.ly/1tjb2MD>

Hirsch explains his personal journey from university humanities professor to crusader for closing the achievement gap by changing schools’ approach to reading instruction. He writes, “Decades of cognitive science research boil down to this: For understanding a text, strategies help a little, and knowledge helps a lot. I consider this the single most important scientific insight for improving American schooling that has been put forward in the past half century. But unless one is familiar with the research, it’s hard to overcome the cast of mind that regards reading and writing as a set of technical skills.”

“A Wealth of Words: The Key to Increasing Upward Mobility Is Expanding Vocabulary”

City Journal

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities, University of Virginia and Founder, Core Knowledge Foundation

<http://bit.ly/1be1Pfx>

Hirsch explains that “vocabulary size is a convenient proxy for a whole range of educational attainments and abilities—not just skill in reading, writing, listening, and speaking but also general knowledge of science, history, and the arts. If we want to reduce economic inequality in America, a good place to start is the language-arts classroom.” He goes on to show how early grades schooling could become far more efficient and effective in building vocabulary, general knowledge, and literacy.

“The Curriculum Reformation: New National Standards Prod Schools to Return to Content-Based Education”

City Journal

By Sol Stern, Contributing Editor, *City Journal* and Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute

<http://bit.ly/1pfADsi>

Stern explores research and recent school reform history to show the need for more emphasis on knowledge-building curriculum. He writes, “No matter how the debate over national standards plays out—and it may never be resolved—one undeniably positive development has resulted from all this. For the first time in almost half a century, education administrators and policymakers around the country are seriously discussing the role of a content-based curriculum in raising student achievement. And that means long-overdue recognition of the ideas of E. D. Hirsch, one of America’s greatest but also most neglected education reformers.”

“Proficient Reading Remains Elusive for U.S. Kids”

By Loren Heal, Reporter, Heartland Institute

<http://bit.ly/1kcgBqH>

This brief article offers a good summary of the research on effective reading instruction, including explaining that children “who can decode can still be functionally illiterate because they don’t understand the words they decode.”

“Lost in Wonderland”

By Karin Chenoweth, Writer-in-Residence, Education Trust

Huffington Post

<http://huff.to/1ioOnt6>

Chenoweth notes that even though Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor worked hard enough in school to be admitted to Princeton, she still lacked essential knowledge. Chenoweth writes, “All kids should be able to rely on their schools to help them become conversant enough with important cultural, historical and scientific touchstones that by the end of 12 or 13 years in school they aren't lost when they hear about *Alice in Wonderland*, or references to Gettysburg, or read a newspaper story about a Supreme Court case or scientific breakthrough. But that kind of grounding requires schools to be very intentional about what kids need to know and be able to do and plan accordingly.”

Book Excerpts

“Why Don’t Students Like School? Because the Mind Is Not Designed for Thinking”

By Daniel T. Willingham, Professor of Psychology, University of Virginia

American Educator

<http://bit.ly/TQqRVK>

In this excerpt from *Why Don’t Students Like School?* Willingham explains how the mind works—and how factual knowledge boosts cognitive ability.

“Beyond Comprehension: We Have Yet to Adopt a Common Core Curriculum that Builds Knowledge Grade by Grade—But We Need To”

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities, University of Virginia and Founder, Core Knowledge Foundation

American Educator

<http://bit.ly/1oFT3Qp>

In addition to an excerpt from Hirsch’s *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*, which explains the role that prior knowledge plays in comprehension, this document also highlights an early version of Core Knowledge Language Arts.

The Intersection of the Goals of Instruction and Language Arts Components

Language Arts Instructional Goal	Group	CKLA Block	CKLA Activity (Primary)	How Well	Where Addressed in Your Current Block	What Activities	How well
Alphabets (phonological analysis, letter names, alphabetic principle)	WG SG I	Skills Sequence	Student Workbooks Whole Class Activities	e.g., ✓✓			
Word Learning (strategic word ID, high frequency words)	WG SG I	Skills Sequence	Skills Readers Student Workbooks				
Knowledge and Comprehension	WG SG I		Shared Interactive Reading Extension Activities				
Language and Vocabulary	WG SG I	Listening and Learning	Shared Interactive Reading Extension Activities				
Motivation and Variety of Text	WG SG I	Skills Sequence and Listening and Learning	Shared Interactive Reading Student Workbooks				

✓ = Addressed somewhat ✓✓ = Addressed well ✓✓✓ = Addressed very well
 WG=Whole Group SG=Small Group I=Individual

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