



Meeting the Common Core State Standards

by Dr. Michael W. Smith

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to “ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy no later than the end of high school.” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) A recent analysis (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, Yang, 2011) of the standards establishes that the CCSS will “shift content . . . toward higher levels of cognitive demand” (p. 106). But the CCSS are about more than rigor. They also pose new challenges for what and how we teach. Let’s explore how *Hampton-Brown Edge* meets those challenges.

Challenge 1: An Increased Emphasis on Informational Texts

The CCSS push for an increased emphasis on informational texts is absolutely clear:

Part of the motivation behind the interdisciplinary approach to literacy promulgated by the Standards is extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. (p. 4).

Indeed, the Standards call for 70 percent of the reading that secondary students do to be informational, although they stress that “teachers of senior English classes, for example, are not required to devote 70 percent of reading to informational texts. Rather, 70 percent of student reading across the grade [i.e. across all of their subjects] should be informational” (p. 5). Despite this caveat, there’s sufficient concern about this changing emphasis that *Washington Post* columnist Jay Matthews published an article entitled “Fiction vs. Nonfiction Smackdown.”

Rather than seeing fiction and nonfiction as being in competition, *Edge* sees them as complementary. All of our units are built around Essential Questions. These questions are so interestingly complex that they have been taken up by a variety of disciplines. If we want our students to think about them, they have to read literature, to be sure, but they also have to read a wide range of informational texts as well. Reading fiction and nonfiction together in service of thinking about those questions invigorates both types of texts. And perhaps more importantly, it makes it clear to

kids that what they read matters in the here and now (cf., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Challenge 2: An Increased Emphasis on Text Complexity

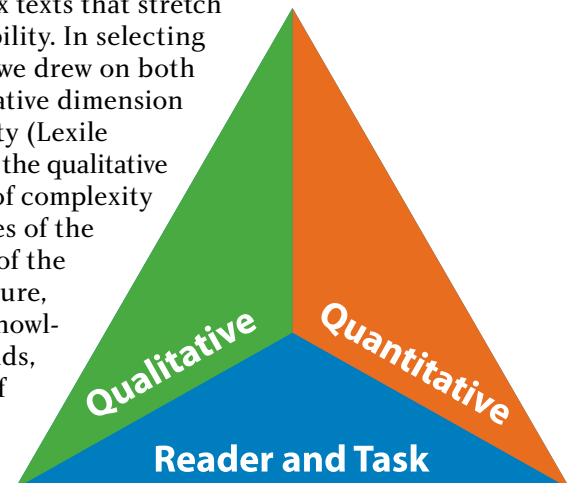
The CCSS “emphasize increasing the complexity of texts students read as a key element in improving reading comprehension.” In fact, Cunningham (in press) argues that “the most widely discussed reading instructional change called for by the CCSS is a significant increase in text complexity.” Indeed, he continues, “those who have not read the standards and only listened to the chatter about them may well have concluded that this is the only major change in reading instruction the CCSS entails.”

Text complexity is itself a complex matter. As the Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy indicates assessing text complexity involves the consideration of three dimensions—qualitative, quantitative, and reading and task.

Edge is designed for striving readers and English language learners. These students need instructional-level texts. So the CCSS’s emphasis on the reading of complex text provided a significant

challenge. We met that challenge by including instructional-level texts accessible reading levels and complex texts that stretch students’ ability. In selecting those texts we drew on both the quantitative dimension of complexity (Lexile ratings) and the qualitative dimension of complexity (our analyses of the complexity of the text’s structure, language, knowledge demands, and levels of meaning).

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Although the CCSS require all students to read complex texts, they explicitly state that they do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations. Therefore, once we selected the texts, we had to draw on our understanding of reader and task considerations to help students grapple with those texts. The very structure of our books is designed to help students do the stretching we ask them to do. In the first place, we provide instruction designed to help them have meaningful transactions with the texts we ask them to read. (More on that in the next section.) In addition, because our units are built around Essential Questions, they involve extended reading, writing, and discussion about texts that address a similar issue. As a consequence, all of the reading, writing, and talking that students do acts as a kind of frontloading (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube-Hackett, 2001) for Close Readings, the “stretch” texts that close each unit. Moreover, because our units are built around questions that address issues that are important in adolescents’ lives, students can draw on their prior knowledge and experiences outside of school as a source of implication. This background knowledge will help students understand the content of the texts, freeing up mental resources to cope with more sophisticated syntax. Moreover, the feelings of competence that our instruction and unit organization develop coupled with the meaningful social work we ask students to do will increase their motivation (cf. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). And as the Supplemental Information

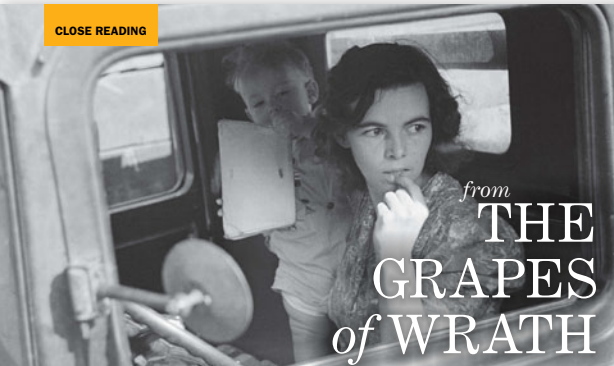
for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy explains, “Students who have a great deal of interest or motivation in the content are ... likely to handle more complex texts” (p. 6).

Challenge 3: Close Reading of Particular Texts

Without question, the CCSS emphasize developing deep understanding of particular texts. Here are the first three anchor reading standards:

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.

However, although these standards focus on learning from individual texts they do so in a way very much in line with the strategy instruction we provide. We focus on making inferences (Standard 1). We focus on determining importance (Standard 2). We focus on synthesizing (Standard 3).



from
THE GRAPES of WRATH
By John Steinbeck

5 Mae walked around the counter and stood in the door. The man was dressed in gray wool trousers and a blue shirt, dark blue with sweat on the back and under the arms. The boys in overalls and nothing else, ragged patched overalls. Their hair was light, and it stood up evenly all over their heads, for it had been **roached**. Their faces were streaked with dust. They went directly to the mud puddle under the hose and dug their toes into the mud.

6 The man asked, “Can we **git** some water, ma’am?”

7 A look of annoyance crossed Mae’s face. “Sure, go ahead.” She said softly over her shoulder, “I’ll keep my eye on the hose.” She watched while the man slowly unscrewed the radiator cap and ran the hose in.

8 A woman in the car, a flaxen-haired woman, said, “See if you can’t git it here.”

9 The man turned off the hose and screwed on the cap again. The little boys took the hose from him and they upended it and drank thirstily. The man took off his dark, stained hat and stood with a curious **humility** in front of the screen. “**Could you see your way** to sell us a loaf of bread, ma’am?”

10 Mae said, “This ain’t a grocery store. We got bread to make **san’widges**.”

11 “I know, ma’am.” His **humility** was **insistent**. “We need bread and there **ain’t nothin’ for quite a piece**, they say.”

12 “I’ve sell bread we gonna run out.” Mae’s tone was **faltering**.

13 “We’re hungry,” the man said.

14 “**Whyn’t** you buy a san’widge? We got nice san’widges, hamburgs.”

15 “We’d sure **admire** to do that, ma’am. But we can’t. We got to make a dime do all of us.” And he said embarrassedly, “We **ain’t got but a little**.”

16 Mae said, “You can’t get no loaf a bread for a dime. We only got fifteen-cent loafs.”

17 From behind her Al growled, “God Almighty, Mae, give ‘em bread.”

18 “We’ll run out ‘fore the bread truck comes.”

Critical Viewing:
Mood What is the mood, or feeling, of this photograph? How did the photographer achieve the mood?

1 “...the road is full a them families goin’ west. Never seen so many. Gets worse all a time. Wonder where the hell they all come from?”

2 “Wonder where they all go to,” said Mae. “Come here for gas sometimes, but they don’t hardly never buy nothin’ else. People says they steal. We **ain’t got nothin’ layin’** around. They never stole nothin’ from us.”

3 Big Bill, munching his pie, looked up the road through the screened window. “Better tie your stuff down. I think you got some of ‘em comin’ now.”

4 A 1926 Nash **sedan** pulled wearily off the highway. The back seat was piled nearly to the ceiling with sacks, with pots and pans, and on the very top, right up against the ceiling, two boys rode. On the top of the car, a mattress and a folded tent; tent poles tied along the running board. The car pulled up to the gas pumps. A dark-haired, hatchet-faced man got slowly out. And the two boys slid down from the load and hit the ground.

In Other Words
a them families goin’ of those families going
ain’t got nothin’ layin’ don’t have anything lying
sedan medium-sized car

Historical Background
In the early 1930s, a drought hit the midwestern U.S. and farmers in the area lost all their crops. This area became known as the **Dust Bowl** because of the wind storms that swept dust over everything. Many families packed what little they had left and drove west to work in the fields of California.

In Other Words
roached brushed to stand upright
git get
humility modesty, lack of pride
Could you see your way to Would you
san’widges sandwiches
insistent demanding, persistent

ain’t nothin’ for quite a piece isn’t anything for quite a while
faltering uncertain, hesitating
Whyn’t Why don’t
admire like
ain’t got but only have

90 Unit 1 Choices

The Grapes of Wrath 91

Close Reading passages provide opportunities for reading and rereading short, more complex texts.

In fact, in a guide for publishers seeking to develop materials consistent with the CCSS, two of the lead authors of the standards (Coleman and Pimentel, 2012) suggest that strategy instruction can support the learning from text goal the CCSS articulate:

Close reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities ... Reading strategies should work in the service of reading comprehension (rather than an end unto themselves) and assist students in building knowledge and insight from specific texts. (p. 9)

That's just what *Edge* does. It teaches students strategies so that they can independently apply them to understand the specific reading we ask them to do. We avoid the "cookie-cutter" strategy-based questions that Coleman and Pimentel critique. The Look Into the Text feature is a salient example of embedding strategy instruction in rich, textual context. In short, we connect text-dependent questions and strategic instruction. As a consequence, we support students' "gathering evidence, knowledge, and insight from [the specific text] they read" even as we are teaching strategies that they can apply in new textual contexts.

In his comprehensive review of research on transfer, Haskell (2000) points out that "Despite the importance of transfer of learning, research findings over the past nine decades clearly show that as individuals, and as educational institutions, we have failed to achieve transfer of learning on any significant level (p. xiii)." Despite this finding, Perkins and Salomon (1988) argue that teachers are too sanguine about the likelihood of transfer, relying on what Perkins and Salomon call the Little Bo Peep view of transfer; that is, if we "leave them alone" they come to a new task and naturally transfer relevant knowledge and skills. But that transfer doesn't happen. Perkins and Solomon note that "a great deal of the knowledge students acquire is 'inert'" (p. 23), meaning that students don't apply it in new problem-solving situations. As a consequence, Perkins and Salomon (1988) argue that teachers must work hard and quite consciously to cultivate transfer. They explain cultivating a "mindful abstraction" of a strategy allows it to be moved from "one context to another" (p. 25). That's why we provide explicit strategy instruction and provide multiple opportunities for students to apply their understanding.

We want students to grapple with the texts that they read so they can learn from them and use them to think about the Essential Questions that organize our units. Strategy instruction coupled with repeated opportunities to apply those strategies in meaningful ways in a range of textual contexts is the way to do just that.

We teach students to understand and apply Toulmin's model of argumentation.

Challenge 4: An Emphasis on Argumentation

The prominence of argumentation in the CCSS is undeniable: "[T]he Standards put particular emphasis on students' ability to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness." We respond to that increased emphasis in two ways. The first is by working to create a culture of argumentation in the classroom through the use of Essential Questions, questions that have no definite answers. Structuring units around such questions signals to students that they'll need to think critically and make the kind of sound arguments that the CCSS are calling for if their ideas about the Essential Questions are to carry the day.

This emphasis on argumentation stands in stark contrast to the patterns of discourse that prevail in schools. Indeed Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran's (2003) analysis of twenty 7-12 grade classrooms reveals that what they call open-discussion, defined as "more than 30 seconds of free exchange of ideas among students or between at least three participants" which "usually begins in response to an open-ended question about which students can legitimately disagree" (p. 707) averaged 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time. This is a pretty depressing finding, but one that we work to overcome by the very structure of *Edge*.

The second response to argument is to provide explicit instruction on how to read and write arguments. We teach students how to understand and employ Toulmin's (1958) model of argumentation, a model of argumentation that allows students to draw on their ability to make effective oral arguments, analyze arguments, and craft effective written ones (cf., Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredrickson). Just as providing explicit strategy instruction with plenty of opportunities for applying that instruction in specific textual situations fosters transfer of learning in reading, so too does providing explicit instruction in the elements of argumentation along with plenty of opportunities to practice applying those elements foster transfer of learning in writing.

We want the struggling readers that our books are designed to serve to be college and career ready by the time they graduate from high school. That's why we have embraced the challenges that the Common Core State Standards pose.

HOW TO READ NONFICTION, continued

■ Unpack the Thinking Process

Whenever you try to convince anyone of anything, you're making an argument. You're making an argument when you try to convince your parents to raise your allowance. You're making an argument when you try to convince your teacher not to assign weekend homework. And you're making an argument when you write a paper to convince your reader that your understanding of a text is right. Although there are many different kinds of arguments, they all have the same structure.

The Structure of Arguments

All arguments start with **claims**. Claims are statements that give the writer's position, or the point a writer is trying to make. Good writers support their claims with strong, relevant **evidence**. They also give **reasons**—they explain how their evidence connects to their claim.

Claim	Reasons	Evidence
<i>I think</i> _____. The point you are trying to make	So what? A clear explanation of why the evidence supports the claim	What makes you say so? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facts• Statistics• Expert Opinions• Personal Experience