

7 The Common Core Standards and Preparation for Reading and Writing in College

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When college faculty members, whether in English or other disciplines, teach entering first-year students, the instructors generally expect their charges to be competent, critical, analytical readers, and to write about what they read in an array of different genres. They usually presume that a student graduates from high school with the ability to comprehend the main and supporting ideas of a text, to understand how an author develops those ideas with evidence and reasoning, to appreciate how the form of a text supports its functions, and to demonstrate their knowledge of these things in their own compositions. These college faculty members are often surprised and disappointed.

Working to ensure that students graduate from U.S. high schools prepared to succeed in college or careers, a joint committee of the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers has worked since 2009 to develop a set of Common Core standards (2010) to guide the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. Adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia (and counting) as of March 1, 2013, these standards hold the potential to affect the ways reading, writing, and math are taught for decades to come and, as a result, influence the preparation of first-year college students to interact with texts in the ways, sketched out above, that their instructors expect them to.

Will the standards achieve this goal? Will students in the future come to college or enter careers better prepared to meet the reading and writing demands they encounter? Perhaps, but not unless edu-

cators take pains to teach students the connections between reading and writing inherent in college and career intellectual work—connections that are *not* evident in the Common Core document—and not unless educators substantially finesse the scope and specificity of the standards. In this chapter, I initially provide some back story related to the development of the Common Core standards, and I unpack why college and university faculty members should understand the implications of the standards for the preparedness of their students for college-level work. Then I focus on the standards related to the teaching and learning of reading and writing in grades six through twelve, explaining what the reading standards imply for the teaching of writing, and vice versa. Finally, I note some gaps in the standards germane to any consideration of reading in the high school-to-college transition, and offer a modest proposal about *what* students should read and write about in high school that could affect *how* they are made ready for success in college and in careers.

HISTORY AND GOALS OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The Common Core standards might be seen as the latest in a line of “let’s-improve-education” products stretching back at least to Congress’s 1965 passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, moving through the famous *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, the failed national history standards project in 1994 and 1995 (about which, more below), and also the authorizing of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002. Indeed, the Common Core standards represent the latest attempt by educational policy makers to determine what students should know and be able to do at certain points in their progress from kindergarten through high school.

While the document provides focuses on only two content areas—English/language arts and mathematics—the standards for the secondary grades provide guidance for “literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects” (Common Core State Standards, 2010, p. 1). Divided into two large chunks, for grades kindergarten through five and for grades six through twelve, the Common Core standards aim to guide what teachers teach their students about how to read, write, understand the English language, conduct research, and do mathematics throughout the curriculum and in several content areas. Of more exigence for the current educational culture, the Common

Core standards promise to undergird the construction of new standardized assessments to determine what students know and can do, and that schools are making adequate yearly progress toward the goals of proficiency in literacy and mathematics established by their states under the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

The potential conflict between the underlying philosophy of the Common Core standards—namely that young people everywhere in the United States should be held to the same expectations for academic performance at their grade levels—and the doctrine of states' rights is palpable in public discussions of the standards. Strict constitutionalists remind supporters of Common Core that providing and guiding public education is a responsibility of the states, and they look with suspicion on any initiative that might be construed as advocating a national curriculum. Proponents of the Common Core standards, however, make clear that the creation of the document was sponsored by two states' organizations, the National Governors' Association, and the Council of Chief State School Officers, and that adopting the standards is strictly voluntary. Encouraging states to adopt the document, though, evinces an interesting bit of hegemony at work: U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan made it clear that states adopting the Common Core standards would have an inside track in "Race to the Top" funds authorized by Congress in 2010 (Lewin, 2010).

WHY SHOULD COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBERS BE CONCERNED?

As I have noted elsewhere (Jolliffe, 2003, 2007; Jolliffe & Harl, 2008), a substantial amount of "water-cooler conversation" and some research corroborate the skeptical attitude that my years of teaching have fostered, supporting the assertion that many college students do not read with the careful, critical acuity required for academic success, and embodied in the Common Core standards. Corroborating hallway discourse, for example, 83% of faculty in California's public two- and four-year colleges maintain that a "lack of analytic reading skills contributes to students' lack of success in a course" (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002, p. 4). Horning and Kraemer's introductory chapter in this volume summarizes an array of research studies, all of which

likewise suggest that contemporary college students' reading abilities constitute a problem for their academic viability and success. Clearly, any college or university faculty member who hopes his or her students succeed must have some stake in the Common Core standards' potential to influence those students' reading abilities.

THE READING STANDARDS: IN ISOLATION AND IN RELATION TO WRITING

What are the standards? The Common Core document presents the reading standards first, before the standards for the teaching of writing, language, and speaking and listening. For English/language arts, the teaching and learning of reading in kindergarten through fifth grade, and sixth grade through twelfth grade, are based on the same ten "anchor standards":

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. (This standard references a footnote about related material in the “Writing” and “Speaking and Listening” anchor standards.)
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 in order 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. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 35)

Following the tenth anchor standard, the document appends the following:

Note on range and content of student reading

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare. Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary non-fiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the

capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts.
(p. 35)

Throughout the document, this notion of “range and content of student reading” results in a classification of three types of texts: literary (fiction, poetry, drama), “informational” texts for English/language arts, and “informational” texts for history/social studies, science, mathematics, and technology.

To flesh out and expand the anchor standards, the document provides individual sets of ten student learning expectations (SLEs), using the same categories as the anchors, for reading literature and informational texts in grades six, seven, eight, nine/ten, and eleven/twelve. Here, for example, are the ten SLEs for the teaching and learning of informational texts in eleventh and twelfth grades:

Key Ideas and Details

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

Craft and Structure

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

5. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness or beauty of the text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.
8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).
9. Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including *The Declaration of Independence*, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 11-College and Career Ready (CCR) text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.
11. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently. (pp. 39–40)

All told, the document provides eleven sets of standards and SLEs to guide the teaching and learning of reading in grades six through twelve.

What exactly are the standards asking teachers to teach and students to learn? For anyone teaching students to read critically and analytically, the standards are not rocket science, and their foci and emphases are perfectly adequate. In the anchor standards and SLEs, numbers one through three direct teachers to teach and students to learn how to determine the main point of a text, how to understand the main point's development with examples and reasoning, and how to draw inferences—ideas, conclusions, and extensions *not* on the page—based on what *is* in the text. Standards Four and Five guide teachers to teach and students to learn about analyzing the diction and structure of a text, while Standard Six directs their attention to the author's purpose, perspective, and to the point of view of a literary text. Standards Seven, Eight, and Nine are a grab bag: Standard Seven focuses on teaching and learning how to read and analyze multimodal texts; Standard Eight centers on teaching and learning argument structure—claims, evidence, and reasoning; Standard Nine points teachers and students in the direction of what reading specialists, following Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann (1997), call “making text-to-text connections” (p. 55).

The problem with the reading standards resides in the contradiction that emerges when one considers them in relation to the writing standards. As the following section shows, the writing standards hint (not too clearly, I might add) that students should learn to write in different genres to address various purposes for a range of audiences; yet, the reading standards and the sample performance tasks that grow out of them suggest that the most important type of writing students must do—perhaps the *only* type they must do—is straightforward, analytic writing about their reading.

THE COMMON CORE WRITING STANDARDS: A DISCONNECT?

As it did with the reading standards, the Common Core document presents ten “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing,” and then provides more specific versions for individual grades kindergarten through eight, and then paired grades nine and ten and eleven and twelve. The first three anchor standards for writing

call on students to “write arguments to support claims in and analysis of substantive topics and tasks, using valid reasoning and relevant and effective evidence”; to “write informative and explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly”; and “to write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences” (p. 36). The next three anchor standards take up issues of good writing in general, writing process, and technology. These standards guide students to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience”; to develop a fully-elaborated and effective writing process; and to “use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (p. 36). The last two anchor standards for writing require students to “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects”; to “gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism”; “to draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research”; and to “write routinely over extended time frames . . . and sort time frames . . . for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (p. 41).

Educators will need to do a bit of conceptual straightening out of the writing standards for them to be useful guidelines for preparing successful writers in high school, college, and the workplace. Moreover, educators will need to work hard to help their students see connections between learning to read and learning to write, as these are connections that are not transparent in the standards document.

First, the conceptual issue: The Common Core writing standards blatantly confuse the concepts of purpose and mode. Purpose, as all composition scholars know, refers to what action the rhetor wants his or her text to accomplish for the audience. Taxonomies of purpose range from Cicero’s three “duties of an orator”—to teach, to delight, and to move—in *De Oratore* to James Kinneavy’s (1981) broad “aims of discourse”: to self-express, to persuade, to refer (i.e., to inform, explain, or demonstrate), and to create a pleasing artifact. In contrast, the traditional modes of discourse, as all compositionists know, were codified in Alexander Bain’s 1866 text, *English Composition and Rhetoric*, and, as Robert Connors (1981) explained, gained a tenacious foothold in composition pedagogy. Bain’s four modes, still alive in the

“rhetorical table of contents” in many composition anthologies, are narration, description, exposition, and argumentation. The modes are not ends in themselves; they are tools a writer can use to develop his or her composition and to achieve a purpose for a reader.

The first of the anchor standards calls for students to write “arguments,” a term that names a mode, not a purpose. I presume the framers of the standards document intended “writing arguments” to be synonymous with “writing to persuade.” The second anchor standard guides students to write “informative and explanatory” texts—two terms that denote purposes (to inform and to explain) that fit under Kinneavy’s general category of “referential discourse.” The third anchor standard urges that students “write narratives”—again, a term used to denote a mode rather than a purpose. The authors of the document try, unwittingly I believe, to finesse the distinction between purpose and mode when they offer this advice about writing narratives: Eleventh- and twelfth-graders are guided in their narratives to “engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance” and to “provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative” (p. 46). In other words, for high school students, narratives generally have an explanatory purpose. Had the authors of the Common Core standards simply explained, “Here is what we mean by purpose in writing and here are the types of purposes you should learn to accomplish,” and “Here is what we mean by modes of writing and here’s how you should learn to use the modes to develop your texts,” then students could benefit from a conceptually unified curriculum that prepared them for the demands of college and career writing.

Second, the lack-of-connections issue: Even though the Common Core standards call on teachers to teach and students to learn how to write arguments, informative and explanatory essays, and narratives, the sample “performance tasks” in the document are solely explanatory—nothing is provided that hints at what kinds of reading students should do to prepare to write arguments and narratives, and nothing is offered to suggest what types of argumentative and narrative writing tasks students should be taught to complete. Indeed, an examination of Appendix B to the Common Core standards document that sets out text exemplars and sample performance tasks, reveals solely explanatory writing-about-reading assignments. For example, a sample

task involving literary texts for this grades eleven and twelve calls on students to “analyze Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Moliere’s *Tartuffe* for how *what is directly stated in the text differs from what is really meant*, comparing and contrasting the *point of view* adopted by the protagonist in each work” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, Appendix B, p. 163). A sample reading task involving informational texts for the same grade level requires students to “*delineate and evaluate the argument* that Thomas Paine makes in *Common Sense*” and to “*assess the reasoning* in (Paine’s) analysis, including the *premises and purposes* of his essay” (p. 171). A sample reading task using informational texts in history/social studies, science, mathematics, and technical subjects at grades eleven and twelve requires students to “*analyze the hierarchical relationships* between phrase searches and searches that use basic Boolean operators in Tara Calishain and Rael Dornfest’s *Google Hacks: Tips and Tools for Smarter Searching, 2nd edition*” (p. 183).

There is certainly nothing inherently wrong with these kinds of formalist, close-reading writing assignments. As I have suggested elsewhere (Jolliffe, 2003, 2007), close analytic reading is the baby that was thrown out with the bathwater when “the writing process” approach, with its strong initial emphasis on accessing students’ affective responses to texts as a starting point for composing, came to dominate high school and college instruction in the 1970s and 1980s. I welcome any curriculum that puts close, rhetorical-analytic reading at its center. If the framers of the Common Core standards are serious about placing equal emphasis on persuasive and informative/explanatory writing in school curriculums, the document needs to attend more fully to how reading and writing tasks can work together to teach students how to write persuasive arguments.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS ABOUT THE STANDARDS IN GENERAL AND ABOUT READING IN PARTICULAR

Educators who have been observing the evolution of the Common Core standards have expressed concerns both about the process of their formation and their content. About the former: The Common Core standards are distinct from earlier educational-improvement projects for the apparent lack of federal involvement in their creation, for the role that both private foundations and for-profit educational organizations

played in their writing, and for the speed with which the whole initiative was brought to fruition. While the standards movement is generally lauded by the Obama administration and members of Congress, both the executive and the legislative branches know that the present political climate does not favor any effort that looks like a usurping of states' rights. The creation of the initiative by the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, therefore, is not only a strategic move, but also a politically correct one.

While the initiative has been directed by two organizations for state officers, some observers are uncomfortable about the involvement of both not-for-profit organizations and for-profit education-product vendors in the standards' creation. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have been generous in their support of the initiative, and the first-line panel of authors of the standards was heavily populated by vendors—not-for-profits that, despite their name, stand to make a great deal of money as the standards are adopted, put into play in state curriculums, and made the basis of assessments. Of the fourteen members of the work group that wrote the English standards, for example, there is only one actual educator: Sandy Murphy, professor emeritus from the University of California at Davis. The other thirteen members are from ACT (formerly American College Testing); the College Board; organizations called "Achieve," "America's Choice," and "Student Achievement Partners"; plus VockleyLang LLC, a public relations firm with some of the aforementioned entities as their clients. Educators were included on the "feedback" and "validation" panels that examined the standards after they were written. Given the deliberate pace at which educational standards are typically written, examined, and validated, the Common Core standards came into being at lightning speed: The initiative was announced on July 1, 2009, and by March 20, 2010, the standards were available for public inspection and comment. One wonders how much influence the educators on the "feedback" and "validation" panels were able to exert in such an accelerated development process.

These potentially troubling financial/logistical elements aside, other observers have scrutinized the potential educational effectiveness of the standards. How good are the Common Core reading standards? Will they really help elementary and secondary teachers teach, and their students learn, how to read carefully, critically, and analytically so the latter are prepared for college and careers? I admit that I share

the misgivings that other educators have voiced about the standards, and I have some of my own. The most salient problem with the reading standards, I maintain, was clearly enunciated in a document from the Thomas Fordham Institute, an educational think tank directed by Chester E. Finn, Jr.: In its analysis of the Common Core reading standards, the Fordham Institute report, *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*, asserts baldly, “the standards do not ultimately provide sufficient clarity and detail to guide teachers and curriculum and assessment developers effectively” (Carmichael, Martino, Porter-Magee, & Wilson, 2010, p. 24). The Fordham Institute document unpacks six other troubling issues about the reading standards:

- Its organization is hard to follow. In particular, the division of the standards into four categories “creates a false sense of separation between inextricably linked characteristics” (p. 23).
- The standards emphasize texts from American literature only in the eleventh grade.
- The standards “fail to address the specific text types, genres, and sub-genres in a systematic intersection with the skills they target” (p. 25).
- The standards “don’t properly scaffold skills from grade to grade” (p. 25).
- Several of the standards for reading literature “are also repeated verbatim in the informational text strand, thus making no distinction in applying this skill to literary or informational text” (p. 25).
- The treatment of both literary elements and principles of argumentation is spotty. For example, while students in grades eleven and twelve are expected to “analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama,” nowhere in the reading standards or SLEs are students led “to define plot” or “to identify the elements of a plot” (p. 25). Similarly, nowhere in any of the SLEs related to anchor Standard 8, about argument structure and argumentative reasoning, are students led to understand the definitions, uses, and limitations of inductive and deductive reasoning (pp. 25–26).

While the authors of the Fordham Institute document take the Common Core standards to task at a microscopic level, I am more

concerned about the shortcomings of the reading standards at a macro level. I am at least marginally satisfied that the *how* of teaching and learning reading is approached adequately in the standards. That is, I think that mastering the reading skills and abilities inscribed in anchor standards One through Nine, if thoroughly understood and taught well by teachers (more on that below), can render graduating high school students better prepared for the reading demands of college and career than many are now. My concerns are about the ways the Common Core standards document handles the *what* of student reading. Let me unpack two of these concerns.

First, while I understand the distinction the standards document tries to make between “literature” and “informational” texts, I believe the differences between the two kinds of texts are naively treated in the standards, and I maintain that “informational” texts is a decidedly limited—and limiting—term. Anyone familiar with either formalist literary criticism, from its heyday in the early twentieth century onwards, or with reading theory, as it has developed in roughly the same time period, recognizes that the “literariness” or “ordinariness” of any text does not reside in the text itself, but instead in the mindset, the intellectual and cognitive schemata, that a reader brings to the text. As Louise Rosenblatt (1978) makes clear in explaining her distinction between “efferent” and “aesthetic” readings, a text *invites* a reader to encounter it at some location on a continuum between a single-minded “carrying away” of information (*effere* is the Latin verb, “to carry”) and a pure experiencing of it as beauty, pleasure, and emotion, but the reader himself or herself makes the decision about where his or her reading lands on the continuum. By bifurcating “literature” and “informational texts,” not only on the anchor standards but also throughout the sets of SLEs, the Common Core document obviates the fact that some pieces of literature can be read efferently—one can certainly garner lots of “information” about the Dust Bowl from *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, a text that the document holds up as “illustrating the complexity, quality, and range” of literary works for grades nine and ten—and that some pieces of what the document calls “informational” text can be read aesthetically (Appendix E). I can’t imagine reading Churchill’s “Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat” (recommended for grades six through eight), King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (recommended for grades nine and ten), or Thoreau’s *Walden* (recommended for grades eleven and twelve) solely for “information.”

These are beautifully crafted texts that young readers can analyze for their rhetorical effectiveness and power and, quite simply, also enjoy for the beauty of their organization and prose. I certainly understand and concur with the framers of the standards' apparent goal of getting teachers to teach, and students to read, more excellent, non-fiction prose, but I fear that the adjective "informational" does not support the best practices of such teaching and learning.

Second, I am concerned about the great pains the authors of the document take to emphasize that nothing in the standards remotely resembles a common or required reading list. The opening paragraph of the document's Appendix B is the clearest statement of the framers' position on a "common core" of texts:

The following text samples primarily serve to *exemplify* the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are *suggestive* of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as *useful guideposts* in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their classrooms. *They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list.* (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, Appendix B, p. 2, emphases added)

The standards' authors, I imagine, have no desire to revive the dispute that came to the fore in late 1994 and early 1995, when scholars at the University of California at Los Angeles affiliated with the National Center for History in the Schools produced a set of "national voluntary standards" for the teaching of history. Former U.S. Undersecretary of Education Diane Ravitch relates this debacle eloquently in her recent book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education* (2010). Though the center had been established with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the NEH chair, Lynne Cheney,

lambasted the standards as the epitome of left-wing political correctness, because they emphasized the nation's failings and paid scant attention to its great men. The standards document, (Cheney) said, mentioned Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism nineteen times, the Ku Klux Klan 17 times, and Harriet Tubman six times, while mentioning Ulysses S. Grant

just once and Robert E. Lee not at all. Nor was there any reference to Paul Revere, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, or the Wright Brothers. Cheney told an interviewer that the document was a “warped and distorted version of the American past in which it becomes a story of oppression and failure.” (p. 17)

After being thoroughly castigated by editorialists and talk-show hosts—Rush Limbaugh claimed that the standards should be “flushed down the toilet” (p. 18)—but endorsed by a range of educational organizations, in January 1995, the standards were officially condemned in the United States Senate in a resolution that passed ninety-nine to one, with the lone dissenter a senator from Louisiana “who thought the resolution was not strong enough” (p. 19).

I understand that any choice foregrounding certain texts as “required” reading automatically backgrounds—and marginalizes—other texts. Just as the creators of the national voluntary history standards had to decide which narratives and “actors” they would include, so would any authors of English/language arts standards who chose to create “a partial or complete reading list” have to be sensitive to issues of inclusion and exclusion. However, I worry that the standards framers’ determination not to recommend any actual “common” texts in the Common Core standards—texts that they urge all students to read at certain grade levels—runs counter to the initiative’s most important goal of helping students become effective critical and analytical readers.

As anyone familiar with reading theory understands, the first move in teaching and learning reading comprehension is to “access prior knowledge.” This step leads the reader to call to mind any actual experiences he or she may have previously had with the issues or ideas developed in the text at hand or, as some theorists (e.g., Egan, 2003) are now framing it, any connections to the text the reader can imagine. High school teacher and consultant Jack Farrell (2004) explains how he teaches students to tap into what they already know or can imagine as they read a text. Egan shows students how to annotate their texts, indicating

1. Some previous life experience, either vicarious or read, although this is, by no means, a pre-requisite.
2. Previous works read in this and other classes.

3. Previous concepts (or abstractions) from this and other classes.
4. Previous experiences with the language, its syntax, its rhythms, and its diction.
5. The first reading of the material. (pp. 2–3)

Educational researcher Robert Marzano (2004) is even more emphatic about the importance of tapping into prior knowledge as a vital stage in learning. Marzano expands the concept to *building* background knowledge, calling upon educators to spend time with focused instruction aimed at developing “learned intelligence”: facts, generalizations, and principles that can undergird the learning of new material.

To be sure, the Common Core document is replete with language about the quality, complexity, and range of texts that educators should select for their students. (This language of agency differs from the curricular practice promoted by one of the organizations centrally involved with writing the standards: America’s Choice. In this organization’s curriculum, students are individually urged to select twenty-five books a year that they propose to read.) By not suggesting that any particular text, either literary or otherwise, should be read by all students at a certain grade level, the framers of the reading standards eliminate the opportunity for educators to develop and offer exemplary, large-scale lessons on *how* a reader accesses prior knowledge, imagines worlds, and builds background knowledge to construct the schemata upon which a successful reading can be constructed. I return to this sticky issue of common, required reading in the final section of this chapter.

PREPARING TO TEACH THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS: MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

College faculty members who want their students to be effective readers must see their colleagues in elementary and secondary schools as allies. So the question arises: What will elementary and secondary school teachers have to do to prepare to incorporate the Common Core reading standards in their courses—in other words, to actually *teach* the ten anchor standards and the parallel twenty SLEs for literature and “informational” texts? First of all, if English teachers are to bear the bulk of the responsibility for teaching the critical and analyti-

cal reading inscribed in the standards, they will have to become more familiar with texts other than fiction, poetry, and drama, and incorporate these “informational” texts in their courses. Currently, texts other than literature have a very low profile in high school English courses. A recent study by Sandra Stotsky (2010), commissioned by the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, found that, of 773 ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade English courses described by respondents in a national survey of high school English teachers, only five book-length works of non-fiction were assigned in fifteen or more courses: Elie Weisel’s *Night* was assigned in seventy-four courses, *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* in thirty-three, King’s *I Have a Dream* in seventeen, and Thoreau’s *Walden* in fifteen. The works of only sixteen authors of non-fiction prose were mentioned fifteen times or more in course descriptions: King, Lincoln, Jefferson, Emerson, Franklin, Thoreau, Patrick Henry, Barack Obama, Thomas Paine, John F. Kennedy, Maya Angelou, Frederick Douglass, Elie Weisel, Mark Twain, Jonathan Edwards, and Malcolm X (p. 73). Stotsky also found that only about a quarter of all ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade courses described by respondents devoted more than twenty class periods a year to non-fiction (p. 27). (A typical high school course, in a thirty-week academic year, meets for 150 class periods.)

In addition, especially to address the language of the first three anchor standards and SLEs, teachers will apparently need to learn more about how to teach close, critical and analytical reading. Stotsky’s study found that only 29% of ninth-grade, 31% of tenth-grade, and 31% of eleventh-grade English courses had “close reading” as their preferred approach to the study of literature, in contrast to 60% at ninth grade, 52% at tenth grade, and 45% at eleventh grade preferring an approach that respondents identified as “reader response.” (Stotsky apparently conceives “reader-response” as an approach in which students simply share their personal, affective reaction to the text, rather than first doing a close reading, as most academic reader-response critics advocate.) Even smaller percentages of courses (22% at ninth grade, 22% at tenth grade, and 31% at eleventh grade) showed that teachers used close reading as a preferred approach to teaching non-fiction (p. 24).

AN OBSERVATION AND A MODEST PROPOSAL

I find it unusual and a tad ironic that while the Common Core standards document is distancing itself from any recommendation of common readings, a great many of the institutions for which the standards are allegedly preparing students (i.e., American colleges and universities) are implementing common-reading programs, in some cases for incoming, first-year students and occasionally for the entire student body, along with faculty, staff members, and community residents. A survey conducted by Andi Twinton (2007) at Gustavus Adolphus College, for example, elicited responses from 130 institutions that sponsor such programs. While I cannot delineate the specific purposes of each of these programs, I can speak for the one at the University of Arkansas that, I think, has a relatively similar purpose as other institutions. In our “One Book, One Community” project, we want all students in our introductory, first-year composition course, plus populations of students from different majors and clubs, plus faculty and staff, plus all the book clubs affiliated with the local public library, to read the same book. We sponsor campus and community events—panel discussions, art displays, film series, play readings—about issues and themes raised in the book. We bring the author to campus for two days of lectures, discussions, and class visits. Through study guides, we explicitly steer students to access their prior knowledge, to imagine other connections, and to build background knowledge about the topic of the book. We want our first-year students in particular to have, usually for the first time in their academic careers, a good experience with an entire book of non-fiction prose. We want to help everyone involved to participate in the construction of knowledge. We want people to talk collectively about what they learned from the book and how they learned it. Not everyone loves the book, but many, many people talk about it, and I can safely say that 99.9 percent of the participating population learns something valuable from the experience of common reading.

What is it that colleges and universities want to achieve with common reading programs that the framers of the Common Core standards—or even officers of state school boards—want to avoid? Is the political fallout from requiring certain works to be read by everyone so nasty that it leads educators to ignore the educational benefits of common readings?

In the face of these questions, let me offer a modest proposal.¹ What if, at the national level (or, more reasonably, at the state level) there was an appointed panel of educators and citizens who established a list of five books—say, for the sake of argument, two novels, one play or entire book of poems, and two non-fiction books—that the panel recommended every student in grades nine through twelve in the nation (or the state) read for the next five years, after which the panel would recommend a different set of five “required” books? Every effort could be made, and the provisions could even be mandated in the language establishing the panels, for the authors of selected texts to be diverse—male and female, native-born and foreign, “mainstream” and “minority.” I am not talking about establishing eternal verities here—I am talking about texts being read for five years.

What would such a project yield? Teachers in grades nine through twelve would have a substantial opportunity to teach students how to build background knowledge to undergird a successful reading. Similarly, these teachers would have a collective opportunity to show students how to make text-to-text connections—the explicit goal of Anchor Standard Nine and the corresponding SLEs. Combining this common reading with an increased emphasis on teaching close, critical and analytical reading—an initiative I have promoted assiduously for the past two years (Jolliffe, 2008)—could help students build upon the Common Core standards and truly be prepared for the reading demands that college and careers hold for them.

The Common Core standards, in summary, can go a long way in preparing students to become the kinds of critical, questioning readers that college and university faculty members expect them to be. Some measure of common knowledge, now generally overlooked in educational reform movements, would be a salutary complement to such standards.

NOTE

1. Thanks to my friend Chris Goering for getting me to think seriously about this proposal.