



Nancy Frey, Ph.D.

Reaching for the Common Core *by Nancy Frey*

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards raises the bar for reading instruction in elementary schools. Their purpose, developed in partnership with the National Governors Association in 2010, was to articulate a set of standards that are fewer in number, clearer in explanation, and higher in rigor. The standards have resonated with educators and curriculum developers nationwide, and have also presented a challenge: How best to staircase literacy learning in order to meet the college- and career-ready goals articulated throughout? Elementary school is the first step on that staircase, and educators need comprehensive curriculum that addresses the shifts in practice that the CCSS require. These shifts, while significant, are not insurmountable. The *Reach for Reading* program was designed with these shifts in mind.

Shift #1: More Informational Text

The standards prod us to examine text types used across the day. While narrative still dominates in the primary grades, by fourth it should be a 50/50 split between narrative and informational. While this figure needs to be considered across the day, not only in the reading/language arts block, it is equally important to consider how texts are used. Duke's (2000) finding that a scant 3.6 minutes a day was devoted to informational text reading in first grade classrooms sounded an alarm for educators. While there has been more attention in the last decade to increased use of informational texts, Yopp and Yopp's (2012) analysis of teaching practices with pre-school through third grade teachers found that 77 percent of the titles they identified as ones used for read alouds were narrative. Among those informational texts, 85 percent were from the sciences (mostly life science), and only 12 percent were related to social studies content.

Reach for Reading prepares children for the world of informational texts. Readings in the physical and life sciences, as well as engineering, abound. As well, many are dedicated to social studies concepts, including geography, history, and economics. Each grade level averages 60 percent informational text, ensuring that students are apprenticed to the specific content reading demands. Importantly, decodable texts, an essential component of a comprehensive reading program, perform double duty. Nearly 75 percent of these readers are nonfiction, and thereby contribute to the learner's knowledge while growing their competence in foundational reading behaviors. In other words, they are learning to read and reading to learn simultaneously.

These decodable texts afford students with experiences building their text and visual literacy skills. Students don't just read about flamingos; they see photographs of the birds in labeled diagrams. The standards stress the integration of knowledge through relationships between text and visual information, and these decodable readers make it possible to seamlessly integrate all.



Shift #2: Shared Responsibility for Literacy Across Content Areas

A second shift is the distributed responsibility for literacy development across the curriculum. The core standards describe reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language development across content areas. Effective teachers are attentive to literacy demands across the day, and seek opportunities to integrate. *Reach for Reading* makes it possible with its attention to engaging reading units that build background knowledge for science and social studies instruction.

Many of these address content that is otherwise challenging to fit into a busy school day. Kindergartners learn about technology and engineering in the *Then and Now* unit. Fifth grade students learn about principles of economics in the *One Idea* unit.

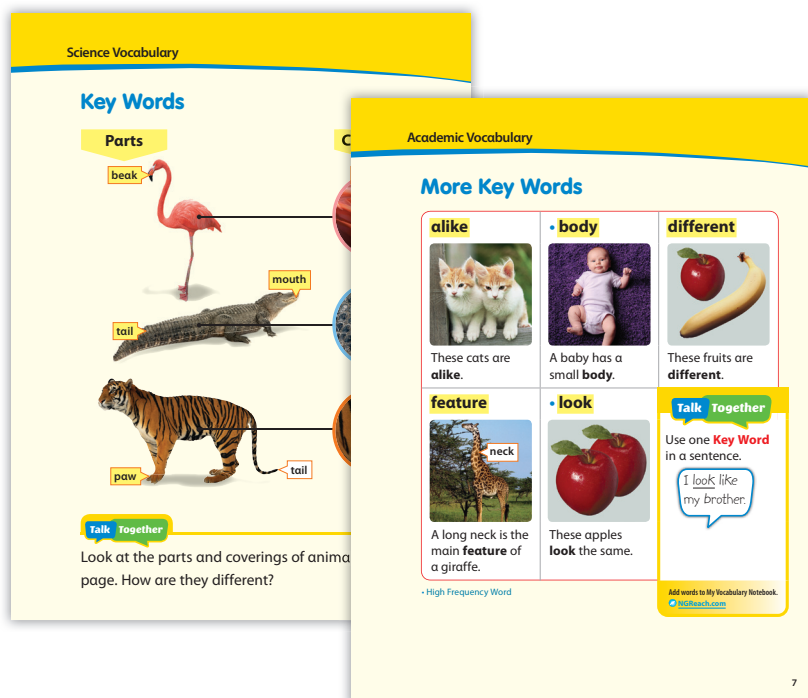
Yet all of this is accomplished without losing sight of the primary mission: to teach students to read, write, speak, and listen using academic language. These grade level content connections allow for reinforcement of important literacy skills while assuring that content knowledge isn't detached from the rest of the learning day.

Shift #3: An Emphasis on Academic Language and Vocabulary

Academic language takes center stage within the core standards. More than simply memorizing a list of vocabulary words, the standards require that students learn how to solve for unknown words by encouraging them to look inside and outside of words: through structural analysis, contextual analysis, and using resources (Frey & Fisher, 2009). Vocabulary is further addressed regarding selection. General academic words and phrases appear more frequently in texts than in everyday speech, and “represent the subtle and precise ways to say relatively simple things” (CCSSO, 2010, p. 33). Domain-specific words and phrases refer to those associated with a discipline. Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2008) call these Tier 2 (general academic) and Tier 3 (domain-specific) words.

The *Reach for Reading* program is filled with routines for teaching general academic and domain-specific words and phrases. Students are introduced to both in the Student Anthology using strong visuals and text. Domain-specific Key Words are linked to science and social studies concepts to support English learners in building academic knowledge and skills. Consistent routines for integrating the use of these words in reading, writing, speaking, and listening abound. These include sentence frames to scaffold students’ use in speaking and writing, as well as the Power Writing routine that links writing fluency with academic language.

Additionally, “In Other Words” is a scaffolded text feature that appears on the pages of the readings. For example, while fourth graders read about underwater kingdoms, they utilize annotated secondary text that expands their definitional understanding of the terms *reef*, *chemicals*, and *outer skeleton*. These scaffolds help make content accessible and help reinforce the further development of vocabulary that must occur through wide reading.

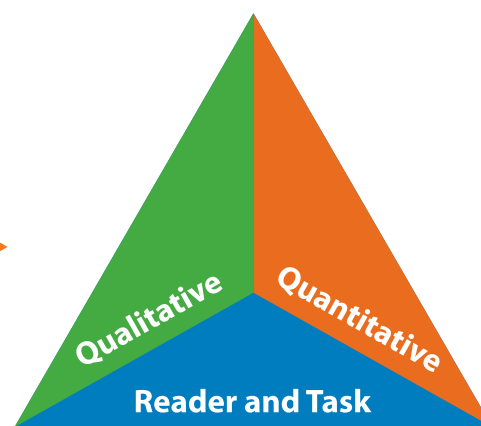


Shift #4: Increased Text Complexity

Classrooms need a range of texts. Some are used for read alouds and shared readings, while others are used for close reading or independent reading. Still others are leveled texts for use in small group reading instruction. The texts should provide a staircase such that students reach expected complexity levels as outlined in the CCSS. Understanding what makes a text complex is critical for teaching students to read and understand rigorous selections. There are at least three ways to consider text complexity: quantitatively, qualitatively, and based on the task readers will be expected to complete (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). Quantitative factors are numeric scores that rely on word choice, sentence length, and syllables, used in a range of different formulas. As such, they provide a good estimation of complexity. However, quantitative measures do not provide enough information about what made the text complex. As well, they are not suitable for evaluating texts used at Kindergarten and first grade, or in poetry.

Qualitative factors, such as levels of meaning, organization, structure, language conventions, and knowledge demands provide teachers with more information about what they can teach using a specific text. The third factor focuses on the task required of the students as they read the text. Undoubtedly, asking students to independently read a text makes it harder. Teacher-led and peer-led tasks allows for increased complexity due to the collaborative nature of the task.

Three dimensions of text complexity ▶

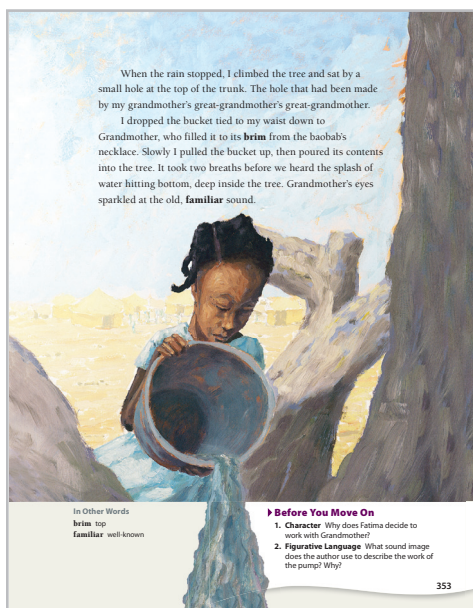


Reach for Reading provides teachers with a wide selection of texts, including an anthology and a classroom library. These texts were specifically selected because they are worthy of students’ time and because they provide the staircase that students desperately need to become sophisticated thinkers and readers. *Reach for Reading* provides teachers with authentic literature and non-fiction as well as the instructional support to ensure that teacher-led and peer-led tasks result in deep understanding. Each topic contains four leveled readers such that students at all levels have content to share with each other. The instructional support provides students opportunities to read and reread, which allows them to synthesize across texts.

Shift #5: Text-dependent Questions

Simply stated, some questions require that students have actually read the text, while others do not. Unfortunately, valuable classroom instructional time can be lost when students are asked questions that encourage them to move away from the text rather than back to it. Text-dependent questions should result in rereading and deep discussions about what the text really means. Sometimes, it's appropriate to ask a general understanding question in which students need to understand the gist of the text. Other times it's appropriate to ask about key details that are critical to understanding the perspective of the author. In addition, there are times when vocabulary questions or text structure questions are valuable. For example, the teacher may ask a question that provides students an opportunity to practice using context clues or morphology. Further, questions can encourage students to consider the author's purpose or to make inferences. These questions require a deep understanding of the text itself and may involve further re-reading to identify clues that the author has provided. In this way, students begin to read like detectives, looking for clues as they read. Finally, there are questions that require that students form an opinion, and support it with evidence from the text. In doing so, they can compare information across texts.

In *Reach for Reading*, texts are read and reread with different aspects of the text highlighted based on the questions asked. In addition, we provide an entire page to “respond and extend” students’ thinking about the text. This allows students to think critically about what they have read and provides them with time and space to respond, using evidence that they have gathered from the text. Finally, we use comprehension questions to ensure that have thoroughly understood the text before moving on. If students fail to grasp the meaning of the text, we provide teachers with ideas about reteaching and skills development.



When the rain stopped, I climbed the tree and sat by a small hole at the top of the trunk. The hole that had been made by my grandmother's great-grandmother's great-grandmother. I dropped the bucket tied to my waist down to Grandmother, who filled it to its brim from the baobab's necklaces. Slowly I pulled the bucket up, then poured its contents into the tree. It took two breaths before we heard the splash of water hitting bottom, deep inside the tree. Grandmother's eyes sparkled at the old, familiar sound.

In Other Words
brim: top
familiar: well-known

Before You Move On

1. **Character** Why does Fatima decide to work with Grandmother?
2. **Figurative Language** What sound image does the author use to describe the work of the pump? Why?

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Shift #6: Argumentation and Text-based Evidence

Argumentation is a critical skill that students must develop if they are going to be successful in college, career, and life. Unlike arguing, argumentation has rules for engagement. In general, these rules include presenting a claim, providing evidence for that claim, offering counterclaims, and agreeing and disagreeing with others, while supplying evidence from the text. In elementary school classrooms, argumentation is opinion-based. Students must learn to clarify their opinions and to support their opinions with facts and evidence. This requires much more than simply noticing the difference between a fact and opinion; it requires that students provide evidence for their opinions.

In *Reach for Reading*, students are provided with specific learning tasks that develop their understanding of argumentation. These begin with the Big Questions (BQ) for each unit, which are designed to spark inquiry, discussion, and debate using information from all the readings: anthology, decodable texts, and leveled libraries. These questions allow children to take the knowledge, insights, and information from what they read to build into BQ discussions over the course of the unit. Returning to those questions again and again and having to mine those texts for perspectives and information that form and shape perspectives on those BQs provides a good foothold for argumentation.



Unit at a Glance
Language: Read & Write, Before and After, Science Words
Literature: Read & Write
Content: Insects

Unit 5

Invaders!

Share What You Know

- Think of a time when you really noticed something in nature. This thing might have surprised you.
- Draw a picture of what you saw.
- Tell the class about what made you notice this thing in nature. What was different about it?

Big Question When do harmless things become harmful?

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Lessons also focus on students' development of opinions, and how they can find evidence to support them. For instance, an interactive whiteboard lesson material profiles the National Geographic explorer Mike Fay's work preserving the redwood forests of California. The teacher can project examples of student opinion writing about this piece of informational text, highlighting passages that offer evidence, reasoning, and the author's opinion.

Saving Giants
by Jason Chapman

A reason is a detail that answers why.

Mike Fay is my hero! He is a National Geographic Explorer who loves to walk. In 2007, he walked more than 1,800 miles, camping along the way. Fay was hiking through redwood forests in California on a mission to help save them. Mike and I believe that **saving these forests is important** because **many living things, including people, depend on them**. Only about 5% of the original redwood forests remain. **The redwood forests are scarce resources that we must protect.**

Use green to highlight the author's opinions.
Use pink to highlight a reason that supports the opinions.

Author's Opinions Reason

The language of opinion is integrated into the program such that students become proficient with the range of interactions necessary to forward an opinion and then agree or disagree with the opinions of others. Using language frames for discussion and writing, students experience how academic language is utilized to forward conversation in speech and on paper. As students learn the academic language of opinion, and develop the thinking required of argumentation when that happens, they're ready to write persuasive pieces.

Writing Project, continued

Revise

1. **Read, Retell, Respond** Read your draft aloud to a partner. Your partner listens and then retells your main points. Next, talk about ways to improve your writing.

Language Frames

Retell <ul style="list-style-type: none">Your viewpoint is _____.The reasons you gave included _____.You want people to _____.	Make Suggestions <ul style="list-style-type: none">Your viewpoint isn't very clear. You could try saying _____.Could you add more details to support _____?I'm not sure what you want people to think or do. Maybe you could _____.
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Conclusion

The core standards require shifts in literacy practices as it relates to access and use of informational texts across the day. Students also need to use academic language in speaking and listening, as well as reading and writing. These shifts represent a change in how it is that we prepare learners for their post-secondary lives. By staircasing their literacy experiences from the beginning, we can foster the kind of achievement we have long aspired to. With *Reach for Reading*, it is within reach.

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