Assessment of CCSS in the English Language Arts Classroom

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts (ELA) define what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century by identifying the reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language behaviors necessary for success both in and outside the classroom. The Standards describe students who "undertake close, attentive reading" of literary and informational texts and "reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

**Reading**

For the past several years, teachers at all grade levels have come to view writing as a process or a collection of strategies. Reading, on the other hand, especially in the middle and high school has focused more on the content of reading, the plot of a novel, for example, or the facts in a scientific text, rather than on the processes students must use to understand and interpret those texts. The CCSS for reading emphasize those reading processes as they are applied to any content.

In addition to an emphasis on informational text and text complexity, the reading standards describe virtually no content to be covered. Topics such as Shakespeare’s life and times or the characteristics of a fable—long mainstays of language arts curricula—are not part of the Standards. Although students are expected to read from a variety of genres and types of texts, no specific texts or types are identified.

Secondary teachers may be pleased that students can no longer be successful by repeating the literary analyses of others found in summaries and the like. However, instruction in this Standards-based environment must consist more of modeling and support for effective reading and writing strategies than of activities centered on a specific literary work or genre. And, consequently, summative assessment, both in the classroom and through standardized assessment programs, must assess how well students can think or write about texts, not what they know or think about any particular text. In other words, students must be able to show they can transfer their thinking to new texts.

The emphasis on transfer and application of skills opens up opportunities as well as challenges for assessment. Students could potentially have more options for what they read, as long as they read texts of appropriate complexity. This could improve student engagement. However, quizzes and exams over specific texts will not assess these standards. Summative assessments of reading must require students to think critically about anything they read, not just a poem or novel they read with the class.

Fortunately, the CCSS for ELA are very specific and can be easily adapted for checklists and rubrics that students can use for self-assessment. Including standards from prior and subsequent grades in a checklist can confirm previously learned skills and set the stage for future growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Standards for Literature K–5</th>
<th>Reading Literature Checklist</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Ideas and Details</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask and answer questions to</td>
<td>I ask and answer questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demonstrate understanding of a</td>
<td>while I am reading.</td>
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<td>text, referring explicitly to the</td>
<td>I refer to specific parts of</td>
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<td>text as the basis for the answers.</td>
<td>the text when I answer</td>
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<td>(Grade 3)</td>
<td>questions.</td>
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Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text. (Grade 4)

- I refer to details and examples when I explain what the text says.
- I refer to details and examples when I explain my inferences from the text.

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text. (Grade 5)

- I explain what I mean using quotes from the text.

The different grade-level descriptions can also be placed into rubrics where students can document their progress over time. A rubric on reading informational text based on the CCSS for ELA is available in the Assessing Projects library. Growth in reading should also be documented as students apply their skills to more and more complex texts.

**Writing**

The CCSS for ELA emphasize writing for a purpose. While they acknowledge that some aspects of writing, such as planning, revising, editing, and publishing, apply to different kinds of writing tasks, other writing types require specific skills. The Standards emphasize writing as argument, making connections with text through writing, and research writing—although other areas of the Standards naturally apply to this topic as well.

Performance assessment for writing has been part of standardized assessment for many years, so unlike the study of reading, most students and teachers do see learning to write as a process of acquiring a set of skills to be applied in different contexts. The key, therefore, is to design writing tasks as vehicles for refining or learning skills.

Classroom-based assessment is the most powerful tool for helping students become confident, capable writers. Both summative and formative assessments play a role in developing writing skills.

Formative assessment methods have been proven effective in improving student learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004). Self- and peer assessment are critical to improving writing. Teacher feedback, a longtime assessment strategy, has mixed results in improving student writing. Extensive teacher feedback has not been shown to improve the quality of student writing (Cotton, 1988, p. 2), especially on final writing products, since this is often viewed as a grade justification rather than a learning tool. Peer feedback has been shown to be just as valuable, if not more so, in improving writing (p. 8).

Since writing is often a product as well as a learning tool, summative assessment is also critical when developing students’ writing abilities. Graham, Harris, and Hebert (2011) suggest strategies for providing good summative feedback to students:

- Let students choose the mode of writing they are most comfortable with. “Writing improves when students are assessed in the format with which they are most experienced—pencil and paper, or word processing” (p. 16).
- Mask the writer’s identity when assessing students’ final writing products. “Writing assessment improves when teachers do not allow their knowledge of who wrote a paper to influence their judgment” (p. 17).
- Grade student papers in random order to avoid being influenced by the score of a previous paper.
- Collect multiple samples of students’ writing in different genres.
- Make sure that student writing is scored accurately and consistently. “Writing assessment improves when teachers use procedures for ensuring that particular aspects of writing, such as quality and its basic attributes, are measured reliably” (p. 7).

References


