15 Great Q&As on the Common Core

Many teachers throughout America will be implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the first time this year. And we've been hearing from you, our growing community on Teaching Channel, that you feel uncertain about the "right" way to do this.

Teaching Channel recently enlisted the help of top CCSS experts — Student Achievement Partners (SAP), a nonprofit founded by authors of the standards, and educators from PARCC and Smarter Balanced who are creating the CCSS assessments — to answer questions from our community of more than 400,000 teachers.

You asked over 250 questions! Collected in this download are 15 of the most popular Q&As we heard from you.

General CCSS Questions

Q. How are you explaining Common Core to parents?

— Nora Doctorian

A. Nora, we have been working on how to present the CCSS to parents in our district, as well. There are some pretty good resources already developed. Here are links to a few of them:

Handout from The Aspen Institute:
The Common Core State Standards: An Introduction for Families and Other Stakeholders

Videos:
Common Core Works

Tools and resources:
Smarter Balanced

And check out this blog from Tch's Sarah Brown Wessling:
Talking to Parents about the Common Core (Resources & Tips)

— Angelle Lailhengue
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Q. How will schools handle the emphasis on technology when current equipment is old and unreliable?

— Stacey Lamb

A. Thanks for your question. The assessments are being designed to ensure comparable results so long as the devices students use meet our minimum requirements. Older systems, such as those with slower processors running Windows XP, should offer a comparable experience to newer machines when administering Smarter Balanced assessments. Notably, we support portable devices such as tablets but require physical keyboards in order to ensure a comparable experience with students using desktop computers.

Numerous efforts have been deployed to measure existing technology readiness and to fill gaps before the first live application of the summative exams in the 2014-2015 school year. These include a **technology readiness tool** jointly developed by the RTTA consortia that helps states measure and plan. Other efforts include **EducationSuperHighway** which advocates for bandwidth to schools, and the White House's **ConnectEd** plan.

Last December, Smarter Balanced Consortium released a technology strategy framework and system requirement

specifications. The framework provides minimum hardware specifications and basic bandwidth calculations that will allow schools and districts to evaluate which of their existing devices will support the administration of the assessments. You can download the framework here: **http://bit.ly/GQ0pzm.**

To assist states that have not yet made the transition to online testing, the Consortium will also offer a paper-and-pencil option for the first three years of operational testing. For more information about technology requirements, visit the Technology page: **http://bit.ly/GQ0pzm.**

— Brandt Redd
Smarter Balanced

Q. Do I teach the same lesson to the entire class no matter the differences in student ability?

— Christine Dwyer

A. Great question, Christine! As educators we will always be responsible for teaching the students who walk through our classroom door each morning. We cannot overlook that they each come with a unique set of gifts and challenges. In most cases, the Common Core Standards expect a much deeper level of understanding than we have previously required from our students. This will not be accomplished by simply teaching to the highest level to the whole group and hoping that the students keep up. We will still need to support and extend for students as necessary. This support might look different in different classrooms depending on the needs of the students. However, every student should be interacting with the higher-level work of their grade every day. We may need to provide scaffolding for those students who are struggling with this in a small group setting, but should never deny those students who are falling behind the opportunity to interact with the higher-level concepts. This will require planning for how we will support those higher and lower students during our whole group instruction as well as in small groups. The biggest point to keep in mind is that we cannot expect our students to perform at the highest levels if we never provide them the opportunity to practice at the highest levels.

— Kristie Martorelli

Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Q. How do I blend Common Core with technology and visual arts?

— Susan Adams

A. You are spot on in wanting to blend the two! You may want to begin reading the **Key Design Considerations** in the CCSS Introduction. This frames how/why technology is integrated into the standards. "To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today's curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section." (p. 4)

As you read through the standards, you'll notice where technology is woven in, as well as the importance of exposing students to multimedia sources of information. A colleague recently shared this **clip of a panel discussion,** which includes one of the lead architects of the CCSS, describing the fit of the arts with the CCSS. This could also be useful as you continue to think about integrating CCSS and the arts. (One of our favorite excerpts begins at min 44:20, but you might find much of it worthwhile!)

— Torrey Palmer
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Watch this Tch video about using technology:
- Google Docs in the Classroom

Q. What does a Common Core classroom look like when teaching Math and Language Arts?

— Jane Sung

A. The answer to how the Common Core looks different than it used to depends somewhat on what state you teach in. The shifts, which can be viewed on **SAP's website**, are the best way to understand the changes. I can give you some real-world examples from my colleagues' primary classrooms. In math they are no longer jumping around from one thing to another. They

are spending significant time focused on the major work of the grade level, which is addition and subtraction at K-2. They have time to make sure they teach it deeply and students understand it. In ELA, they are doing more integration with science and social studies topics, helping students use nonfiction text to gain knowledge. They are also more intentional about asking text dependent questions during read aloud, and using complex text with guided reading groups.

— Jennie Beltramini
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Watch these Tch videos and look inside Common Core math and language arts classrooms:
- Conjecturing About Functions
- Theme, Symbolism, & Allusion

Q. Do you have sample assessments that align with the Smarter Balanced expectations?

— Lori Lammers

A. Hi Lori, You can find a couple of great examples here: **http://bit.ly/1fAnMvJ.** While there are not a lot of assessment items, they are built in much the same way as the close reading exemplar lessons — which draw from the text complexity rubric and Guide to Writing Text Dependent Questions, and can also be found at **Achievethecore.org.** We use the culminating tasks from the close reading exemplar lessons (as well as from the Basal Alignment Project/Anthology Alignment Project lessons) as another great assessment resource.

And as I'm sure you've seen, Smarter Balanced has posted practice tests and sample items that are also very enlightening! Good luck!

— Torrey Palmer
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Q. As a librarian, what books should I focus on purchasing for my collection in order to best enhance the Common Core Standards of my high school?

— Candy Wiggins

A. The CCSS discusses the use of primary source documents, so it would be great if you had a number of primary sources for students to read! Also, there is an emphasis on reading multiple works by the same author, so showcasing different authors who have written multiple texts would be great for teachers. Hope this helps!

— Katie Novak
Tch Member

English Language Arts Questions

Q. Where can I find good writing prompts that fit the Core?

— Scott Crow

A. In reading the Key Design Considerations to the Common Core (in the introduction) as well as portions of Appendix A, it's important to consider how writing and reading might be integrated. With evidence-based writing as such a key element of the CCSS, the sources from which students draw become just as important (sometimes more!) as the prompt itself.

It might be worth checking out the close reading exemplars found here: **http://bit.ly/1fAnMvJ.**

Each of these lessons includes at least one or more culminating tasks which would be a great opportunity for writing instruction (following a close reading). The Anthology Alignment Project resources also include culminating tasks — again, connecting writing to reading. One more resource, **In Common,** offers annotated student samples for grades K-12 in each of the 3 genres. Good luck!

— Torrey Palmer
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Watch this Tch video:
- Getting Ready to Write

How do I get students to interact with text when they cannot write in their books?

— Julie Kudish

A. STICKY NOTES — The world's greatest invention! The students can put notes in the text, write notes to themselves, and NOT write in their books. Plus, they love using them.

— Lisa Waner
Tch Member

Watch this Tch video:
- Little Notes for Big Discussions

Where can I find a detailed list of complex text examples for each grade level other than appendix B?

— Petria Gallardo

A. I work primarily with math, but I know several teachers use the Basal Alignment Project on Edmodo. That might be a good resource to check into. There is also a section on **Achievethecore.org** on text complexity that you could try. Hope this helps!

— Michelle Ruckdeschel
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

How can I help ELA teachers plan effective lessons for the CCSS?

— Wendy Allen

A. It's well worth checking out the exemplar close reading lessons here: **http://bit.ly/17H3Deu.**

You could pull together a small group of teachers and ask them to implement one of these lessons (perhaps following some discussion around the Instructional Shifts), and then invite them back to debrief/reflect on their experience. In our district we found that when we started small, and with something concrete like the exemplar lessons, teachers could experience firsthand how the CCSS are different.

It's also well worth spending some time reading the introduction and portions of the appendices to the CCSS **(www.corestandards.org).** These documents have a wealth of information around the intent and research behind the Standards.

If you are looking for more content and firsthand experience around this kind of work, check out **www.coretaskproject.com.** A colleague posts a host of resources and links that might help.

— Torrey Palmer
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Watch this Tch video:
- Evidence & Arguments: Lesson Planning

How do you prioritize the Standards? We all do our best to teach everything we can, but time can be limited. Are there recommendations?

— Joann Henry

A. Great question, Joann! The ELA Standards are designed to work together because reading, writing, speaking and listening should be an integrated process. The introduction of the CCSS notes that, "Although the Standards are divided into Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language strands for conceptual clarity, the processes of communication are closely connected, as reflected throughout this document. For example, Writing Standard 9 requires that students be able to write about what they read. Likewise, Speaking and Listening Standard 4 sets the expectation that students will share findings from their research." (p. 4) So you really don't want to prioritize some Standards at the expense of others.

With that said, yes time is an issue. The Instructional Shifts may serve as a tool to help prioritize what is most important (or different) about the Common Core. You can learn more about the shifts here: **http://bit.ly/16KKixc.**

Another way to think about it is instead of prioritizing the Standards, prioritize the texts you are teaching. Select texts that are worthy of reading, and promote rich and rigorous discussion and writing — and drop those that aren't worthy.

— Torrey Palmer
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Q. Can you suggest ways of integrating CCSS Math with Science?

— Paula Weaver

A. Many of the connections are actually built into the Standards; this is the idea of coherence within a grade level. Often the major work of the grade level is applied in the Measurement and Data domain and can be applied in science. For instance, in fifth grade, one of the major emphasis areas is fractions and decimals. Standard 5.MD.A.1 says, "Convert among different-sized standard measurement units within a given measurement system (e.g., convert 5 cm to 0.05 m), and use these conversions in solving multi-step, real world problems." This can definitely be done in science when students are using metric measurement within a science lab situation, as a way for the students to apply their math learning around decimals to science.

— Jeannie Beltramini
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

Watch this Tch video:
- Experimenting with STEM: The Barbie Bungee Jump

Q. Where can I find interactive math problems like those that appear on the Smarter Balanced sample test items?

— Jane Harris

A. You can now access online Practice Tests, available on the Smarter Balanced website here: **http://bit.ly/GZXdSs.** The Practice Tests feature sample test questions for grades 3–8 and 11 in both English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics. Although the Practice Tests do not include all of the features of the operational assessments, they will help schools prepare for the implementation of the assessment system in the 2014–15 school year.

— Shelbi Cole
Smarter Balanced

Q. Any tips on transitioning middle school students to the Common Core Math Standards?

— Claudia Sherry

A. The Common Core requires a balance between conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, and application. One tip is not to drop procedural fluency work altogether, but do it in the areas the Common Core requires. This will allow students who don't feel particularly successful with this type of math to still experience success. In addition, our job as teachers is to strengthen their thinking and foster academic growth. I explain this to my students and let them know I'll be challenging them and asking them to do math in new ways, but that I'll help them and provide support. They know up front they'll have the opportunity to show their skills with procedural fluency, but also be challenged to do more problem solving. I also find that scaffolding tasks and problems in the beginning helps as a bridge to independence. A gradual release model of "I do," "we do," "you do" works well. Model it, do it with them, and then ask them to try it on their own.

— Jennie Beltramini
Student Achievement Partners Core Advocate

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