

Comparing the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Frameworks in Reading for 2009 and Writing for 2011

Introduction

Through the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS), states and territories have collaborated in the development of a common core of standards in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics for grades Kindergarten through twelve that are now being adopted by states. Designed not only for the purpose of providing strong, shared expectations, the Common Core State Standards will also allow adopting states to collectively create and share high-quality tools such as assessments, curricula, instructional materials (such as textbooks and software), and professional development programs.

As educators and policymakers review the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy, they will want to consider the way these new standards compare to, and build on, existing standards in ELA. This brief describes the comparison between the CCSS and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Frameworks for Reading for 2009 and Writing for 2011.

Common Core State Standards in for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects are the culmination of a broad-based effort led by the states to create next-generation K–12 ELA standards aimed at ensuring that all students graduate from high school ready for college and careers. The K-12 CCSS in ELA are divided into four strands: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language. In addition, at the middle and high school levels (grades 6-12), the CCSS also set requirements for literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects.

College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards anchor the CCSS and define general, cross-disciplinary literacy expectations that must be met for students to be prepared to enter college and careers ready to succeed. The K-12 grade-specific standards define end-of-year expectations and a progression designed to enable students to meet college and career readiness expectations no later than the end of high school. The CCR and high school (grades 9–12) ELA standards work in tandem to define the college and career readiness bar—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity.

NAEP Frameworks for Reading and Writing

NAEP is the only nationally representative and continuing assessment of what U.S. students know and can do in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography and U.S. history. Since 1973, NAEP has assessed samples of students in grades 4, 8 and 12, enabling the comparison of results over time and across states. NAEP results, in fact, were one impetus for the development of the CCSS. State-by-state comparisons on NAEP have revealed the disparity between states' assessments and NAEP and discrepancies in the definition of "proficient." By providing a common metric of success, NAEP offers an honest benchmark for policymakers and educators to measure student success and make cross-state comparisons, much like the CCSS aim to do by setting common expectations across states.

The NAEP assessments are based on frameworks that reflect current research in each subject area. These frameworks are updated periodically, and any changes are documented carefully so the assessment can provide a clear picture of student achievement over time. The NAEP assessment frameworks are designed to support test development, not to serve as a guide for curriculum or instruction. Thus, they focus on the content and skills that are deemed most important to assess at grades 4, 8 and 12. Since NAEP is well respected by policymakers and educators alike, the NAEP Frameworks in Reading and Writing were important resources for the developers of the CCSS. Achieve has analyzed the CCSS and the NAEP Reading and Writing Frameworks to determine how they compare in terms of content and what is addressed at the various grade levels.



Achieve's Analysis

Achieve has analyzed the CCSS and the NAEP Framework in Reading and Writing to determine how they compare in terms of **rigor, coherence and focus**. Experts conducted a side-by-side comparison of the documents, looking particularly at the inclusion and treatment of topics at each grade level assessed by NAEP.

Rigor refers to the degree that sets of standards address key content that prepares students for success beyond high school. In ELA standards, the challenge is how to clearly articulate the expected level of accomplishment in processes and products, and, thus, present a meaningful level of rigor in the standards. **Coherence** refers to whether the standards reflect a meaningful structure, revealing significant relationships among topics, and suggest a logical progression of content and skills over the years. **Focus** refers to whether the standards suggest an appropriate balance in the concepts and skills that should and can be acquired by graduation from high school; standards should be teachable and key ideas should be clear.

Standards that are rigorous, coherent and focused provide better guidance to educators, students, and parents about desired learning outcomes than those that are not. Expert English language arts content analysts conducted a side-by-side comparison of the three sets of standards, and this brief describes their findings.

Major Findings

-  The NAEP Reading and Writing Frameworks and the CCSS are well aligned and are at a comparable level of rigor and focus in most areas.
-  A comparison of the NAEP Reading Framework and the CCSS shows that they are similar in coherence and expect students to master many of the same skills and concepts across K-12.

Detailed Findings

Rigor and Focus

The CCSS and the NAEP Frameworks in Reading and Writing are comparable in terms of rigor as both draw on a body of research that has sent a strong message about the most fundamental aspects of learning to read and write, and identify important benchmarks for students. As a result, the CCSS and the NAEP frameworks are largely consistent in the kinds of texts and skills that they address.

The CCSS are well aligned to the NAEP Reading Framework.

Both the NAEP Reading Framework and the CCSS distinguish the same two general types of texts that students need to be able to read well: literary and informational. The NAEP Reading Framework describes the kinds of texts that will be used to assess students and the CCSS describe the breadth of reading that students need to engage in as they progress through K-12. The literary forms that each refers to include narrative prose and poetry. Both also identify important literary nonfiction (such as essays, speeches, and autobiographies); history and science writing; and technical texts. The two documents describe similar expectations regarding procedural texts, including maps, timelines, graphs, tables and charts that are typically embedded in informational materials.

Additionally, both the NAEP Reading Framework and the CCSS suggest the same ratio of reading genres throughout the grade levels. In both, the reading of literature is balanced with the reading of informational texts, with the emphasis on informational materials increasing, with a decrease in literary texts, moving from the elementary to the secondary school levels.

The NAEP Reading Framework describes not only the kinds of texts that students will encounter on the assessment, but also the cognitive targets – the mental processes or kinds of thinking that underlie reading comprehension – that will be addressed. For example, the NAEP Reading Framework expects that students at each benchmark grade will be able to locate or recall information in increasingly sophisticated texts. The Framework also highlights the ability to interpret different kinds of texts or make inferences from them. Depending on their age, students reading a literary text might be expected to infer mood or tone, or to examine the relations between theme and setting or characters. Skills expected for informational texts include summarizing main ideas and finding evidence in support of an argument.

The CCSS clearly address these skills, beginning with the first College and Career Readiness Reading Standard that requires students to “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it...” Expectations are back-mapped from this standard all the way through the grade levels. The CCSS attend to all of these tasks from grades 3 through the secondary level, and parallel the cognitive demands of NAEP quite well.

 ***The NAEP Writing Framework and CCSS focus on the same types of writing.***

Although using slightly different terminology, both NAEP and the CCSS highlight three forms of writing—narrative, informational and persuasive. NAEP assesses a student’s ability to write for three purposes: to persuade, to explain, and to convey an experience. The CCSS include expectations for students to produce arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives—forms that clearly parallel NAEP. NAEP also outlines a distribution across the grades of the core purposes and types of student writing, shifting up from 30% persuasive and 35% informative texts at grade 4 to 40% for both types at grade 12, and moving down from 35% conveying experience at grade 4 to 20% of such writing at grade 12. This increased emphasis on writing arguments and informational materials is reflected as well in the CCSS.

 ***The criteria for effective compositions are similar in the NAEP Writing Framework and the CCSS.***

Both NAEP and the CCSS recognize that similar elements such as organization and conventions are important to any piece of writing. The expectations that students use correct grammar, usage, and mechanics, and attend to word choice are fully laid out in the CCSS much as they are in the NAEP expectations. Both also address the importance of tailoring writing strategies to the intended purpose of a text. For example, NAEP describes an effective persuasive piece as one that “Formulate[s] a clear position that recognizes and acknowledges multiple aspects of the issue.” Similarly, the CCSS identify the goal that students be able to “Establish a substantive claim... and distinguish it from alternate or opposing claims” in developing an argument. Both expect that a well-written narrative includes pertinent details. In such ways, both NAEP and the CCSS avoid describing effective writing merely in generic terms. The two documents are very consistent in their approaches to this aspect of writing.

 ***The CCSS have a stronger focus on the full range of language arts skills than the NAEP Frameworks, by design.***

Because the CCSS cover the range of language arts skills, speaking, listening, media and research are prominent in the standards. Although some skills are not readily accessible for large-scale assessments such as NAEP (and, as such, NAEP assesses reading and writing in separate tests, but does not test speaking or listening), the ability to communicate orally and through other non-print means is critical to success in the modern workplace, hence the inclusion of those expectations in the CCSS. Similarly, the ability to search out information and to synthesize and present findings is a focus within the CCSS, although such skills are not amenable to a test design such as the NAEP Frameworks. Also due to their different purposes, the CCSS focus on the integrated nature of literacy that is not mirrored in the two NAEP Frameworks that describe separate assessments.

Coherence

A comparison of the NAEP Reading Framework and the CCSS shows that they are similar in coherence and expect students to much master many of the same skills and concepts across K-12. A key difference, however, between the CCSS and the NAEP Framework is the degree to which NAEP requires students' to *critique* and *evaluate* objectively literary texts—with a high degree of coherence—beginning in elementary through high school. In forming a critique, a reader's focus remains on the text but the reader's purpose is to consider the text critically from numerous perspectives and synthesize what is read with other texts and other experiences. NAEP calls for evaluation at the advanced levels for fourth grade, but places this ability in the proficient ranges for the eighth and twelfth grade assessments. Unlike NAEP, the CCSS expect students to evaluate texts and the author's use of language, beginning in the seventh grade. In addition, the CCSS expect students to form an interpretation of a text, only at grades 11-12 when they should be able to "Compare and contrast multiple interpretations of a drama or story," examining even at this point someone else's interpretation, not their own.

Conclusion

Overall, the CCSS are well aligned to the NAEP Frameworks for Reading and Writing. The three documents are based on a common vision of the key benchmarks students must reach in developing as readers and writers. Both take similar stances on several critical issues in reading and writing, such as the idea that it is important to develop specific skills for reading particular kinds of texts (i.e. types of literary or informational texts), or that writing strategies must be suited to the purpose of the text. Policymakers can be assured that in adopting the CCSS, they will be setting learning expectations for students that are well matched to the performance expectations defined by the National Assessment Governing Board in both reading and writing.

Achieve is a bipartisan, nonprofit education reform organization that has worked with states, individually and through the 35-state American Diploma Project, for over a decade to ensure that state K-12 standards, graduation requirements, assessments and accountability systems are calibrated to graduate students from high school ready for college, careers and life. Achieve partnered with NGA and CCSSO on the Common Core State Standards Initiative and a number of its staff and consultants served on writing and review teams. For more information about Achieve, visit www.achieve.org