

# Comparing the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects to California and Massachusetts Standards

## Introduction

Through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative, states and territories have collaborated in the development of a common core of standards in English language arts 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 for English Language Arts (ELA) 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 standards of two states that have been leaders in standards-based ELA education: California and Massachusetts.

## Common Core State Standards 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.

## English Language Arts (ELA) Standards in California and Massachusetts

**California's** well-regarded ELA Content Standards ("California standards") articulate expectations for students in Kindergarten through grade 12 that are organized in four strands: Reading, Writing, Written and Oral English Language Conventions, and Listening and Speaking. The California standards have received well-deserved recognition for their quality and rigor.

**Massachusetts** has attracted national attention for its education reforms and for the progress the state has made in boosting student achievement. Massachusetts' students, for example, are regularly among the nation's top performers on NAEP. The state's highly-regarded 2001 ELA Curriculum Framework describes expectations for pre-kindergarten through grade 12. It is organized into four strands: Language, Reading and Literature, Composition, and Media.

## Achieve's Analysis

Achieve has analyzed the CCSS and California's and Massachusetts' standards to determine how they compare in terms of **rigor, coherence, and focus**.

**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 ELA content analysts conducted a side-by-side comparison of the three sets of standards, and this brief describes their findings.

## Major Findings

- ✓ The CCSS and the California and Massachusetts standards are similarly rigorous, and describe substantially similar bodies of knowledge.
- ✓ The CCSS and the California and Massachusetts standards emphasize similar amounts of content in each grade level, but the CCSS are more coherent since they provide clearer and more precise progressions of learning across the grades.
- ✓ All three sets of standards focus clearly on the need for students to be able to read materials at an appropriate level of demand at every grade level.
- ✓ While there are a number of similarities between the CCSS and the California and Massachusetts standards, there are several key differences that set the CCSS apart. The CCSS are clearer about the level of demand and provide extensive support materials. The CCSS also include literacy standards for grades 6-12 in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects and pay greater attention to listening skills and to word choice.

## Detailed Findings

### Rigor

Both Massachusetts and California have highly-regarded, rigorous ELA standards. Achieve has used both sets of standards for years as benchmarks against which to compare other state standards. Moreover, both the Massachusetts and California standards were important resources for the CCSS writing teams.

Achieve's analysis indicates that overall the three sets of standards are similarly rigorous, and describe substantially similar bodies of knowledge.

### Coherence and Focus

Achieve's analysis indicates that the Common Core State Standards, California and Massachusetts standards share key traits of coherence and focus. For example, all three documents include strands or sets of standards that focus on reading both literary and informational texts, writing in specific genres, listening, speaking, and language skills. They also all emphasize a few key topics and develop connections among those topics at each grade level, which helps to ensure a greater depth of learning. All three standards' documents address connections across reading, writing, speaking, and listening for each grade.

Despite these similarities in coherence and focus, there are critical differences between the CCSS and the California and Massachusetts standards. The result of these differences is that the Common Core State Standards provide more precision about the integration and progression of content and skills across the grades.

### **Depth and Breadth of Reading Materials:**

The CCSS and the California and Massachusetts standards require students to read not only literature, but also a wide range of informational materials throughout K-12. Reading informational materials is critical for success in mathematics, science, social science, and other content areas. All three sets of standards also address the essential role that increasing text complexity plays in a student's developing maturity as a reader, albeit in different ways. The supports offered by the CCSS around measuring and recognizing text complexity are even more extensive than those found in either state's materials.

All three sets of standards, for example, offer some form of guidance about the kinds of reading most appropriate for students across grade levels. Massachusetts provides lists of suggested authors that are appropriate to read at various grade levels. In addition, the state provides an explanation of the factors that teachers should take into account when they judge the appropriateness of a text and whether it merits close study, clearly noting complexity as a major consideration. In order to communicate as clearly as possible the expectation of reading level at the crucial point of end of grade three, for example, the Massachusetts document provides excerpts from texts that students should be able to read by the end of that grade.

California provides a searchable database, *Recommended Literature, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, which illustrates the quality and complexity of the materials to be read by students. The 2009 list includes more than 3,400 fully annotated titles in six languages commonly spoken by California students. The development of the database was coordinated by California Department of Education staff with the assistance of many stakeholders, including teachers, consultants from school and public libraries, administrators, curriculum planners, college professors, and parents. The collection provides a broad range of books that serve as examples of the kinds of materials that will help students meet California's content standards in reading and language arts. Local school officials and teachers are encouraged to use this list as a resource in designing standards-based instructional programs. A collection of *Literature for Science and Mathematics* for students in Kindergarten through grade 12 is also included in the database.

The CCSS *Appendix A* includes an extensive explanation of why text complexity matters and provides a three-part approach to determining the complexity of a text that includes quantitative and qualitative measures, and reader and task considerations. The use of such a protocol supports the efforts of educators to evaluate the appropriateness of a text, whether or not the text happens to be included on any list. The CCSS also provide sample annotated texts that include a text excerpt along with an explanation of how the quantitative and qualitative measures and the reader-task considerations apply to that text, and offer a recommended placement (e.g., the grade or grade span that the data suggest as appropriate for that text.) The CCSS *Appendix B* provides 333 excerpts or full-length texts as exemplars for grades Kindergarten through grade 12 as well as sample performance tasks associating a text with the relevant grade-level Common Core reading standard.

Neither Massachusetts nor California requires the study of any specific texts, while the CCSS clearly calls for the study of historically and literarily significant foundational documents including the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address and at least one Shakespearean play.

### **Reading & Writing in the Content Areas:**

One unique element of the CCSS is the inclusion of reading and writing standards for history/social studies, science and technical subjects for grades 6-12. Since classes at the elementary level are most typically taught by one teacher who covers all of the academic content areas, the CCSS include not only standards that refer to reading and writing about informational texts, but also recommendations for texts, including nonfiction books, articles, and digital sources, covering history, science and technical topics. Although California does offer a web-based list of *Literature for Science and Mathematics* for

students in Kindergarten through grade 12, the attention that the CCSS give to this area is more pronounced than found in either California or Massachusetts. The CCSS clearly hold that preparation for reading complex informational texts should begin at the very earliest elementary school grades. Included in the standards is an example that uses domain-specific nonfiction titles across grade levels to illustrate how curriculum designers and classroom teachers can infuse the English language arts block with rich, age-appropriate content knowledge and vocabulary in history/social studies, science, and the arts. This division reflects the unique, time-honored place of ELA teachers in developing students' literacy skills while at the same time recognizes that teachers in other areas must have a role in this development as well.

### **Explication of Writing Standards:**

All three sets of standards require similar types of writing tasks to be mastered. The CCSS emphasize the capacity to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, including to narrate, to persuade and to explain. Beginning with the expectations for grade 3, the CCSS address the writing of opinions, informative/expository text, and narratives. Similarly, California and Massachusetts expect students to develop writing skills for different forms. California's standards include brief narrative and descriptive pieces beginning in the standards for grade 1, and also include biographical/autobiographical narratives or short stories, responses to literature, analytical essays and research reports, persuasive compositions, business letters, and technical documents. Massachusetts divides its writing expectations into either imaginative/literary writing or informational/expository writing.

Each set of standards also offers criteria for writing that are specific to particular forms and to specific grade levels. The CCSS, for example, require that students in grade 2 "Write narratives in which they recount a well elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure." In a similar manner, both Massachusetts and California provide explicit criteria for writing, such as California's grade 3 requirement that students write "brief narratives based on their experiences" that "move through a logical sequence of events" and "describe the setting, characters, objects, and events in detail."

What sets the CCSS treatment of writing expectations apart from those of the states is the set of supportive materials provided in an appendix to the standards. The CCSS **Appendix C** provides writing samples that have been annotated to illustrate the criteria required to meet the Common Core State Standards for particular types of writing—argument, informative/explanatory text, and narrative—in a given grade. Each of the samples exhibits at least the level of quality required to meet the writing standards for that grade. Massachusetts assesses writing at grades 4, 7 and 10, and makes student samples of the various score points available on the state's website each year. These samples are annotated to explain how the writing relates to an element of the state's scoring rubric. Likewise, California releases annotated samples of its yearly assessment of writing at grades 4 and 7. The CCSS, on the other hand, include samples of student writing from Kindergarten through grade 12, with examples of at least two different writing types at each grade level, and the annotations relate specifically to the criteria included in the standards for that grade level, not to generic writing test rubrics. The clear explication offered by provided writing samples for all grades, in a multitude of genres, and linked specifically back to the relevant grade's standards goes beyond previous state attempts to communicate the level of rigor and focus demanded by a set of standards.

### **Attention to Word Choice:**

All three sets of standards include the requirement that students *use* accurate and vivid word choices in their own writing. However, the CCSS emphasize the analysis of an author's word choice and the expectation that students consider how word choice affects readers to a greater extent than California or Massachusetts. For example, at grade 7, the CCSS expect students to be able to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text—including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings—and to analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone in informational texts. The other state standards tend to apply such close reading to literary texts and not to informational materials.

**Research and Media:**

All three sets of standards emphasize the importance of research, but the CCSS devote a far greater emphasis to this area than the states' standards. Although both Massachusetts and California highlight the importance of research by designating standards that address the ability to gather information from a variety of sources, and to analyze and evaluate its quality in the elementary grades, the CCSS start students even earlier in this area. From Kindergarteners who are expected to be able to participate in shared research by exploring a number of books by a favorite author and expressing opinions about them, to high school students who conduct sustained research projects, the CCSS standards focus clearly and significantly on this important area across the entire set of K-12 standards. The research requirements in the CCSS do not appear in a strand that is apart from others, but, rather, integrate research skills into the reading and writing areas, thus communicating a direct and coherent message that all of these processes are intertwined and interdependent. Comparatively, California introduces a separate strand of standards on research and technology beginning in fourth grade, while Massachusetts starts its second graders generating questions and gathering information from several sources in a classroom, school or public library.

The media strands in both California and Massachusetts are effective in focusing attention on this area, but the CCSS chose to integrate such skills into its reading and writing and speaking and listening expectations, thus sending a very clear message that these skills are not only important, but are inherent in the language arts processes. The CCSS also recognize that to be ready for college, careers and life in a technology-driven 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 non-print texts in media forms old and new.

**Speaking and Listening Skills and Contexts:**

California, Massachusetts and the CCSS all address the importance of speaking and listening skills for students in K-12. The CCSS treat listening as an interactive skill, beginning with expectations for the earliest grades. First graders, for example, are expected to "Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media." The Massachusetts standards expect students to be able to question, listen and contribute in a group discussion, but the attention to the interactive nature of strong listening skills is much clearer in the CCSS than in Massachusetts.

With respect to speaking, California is more specific in terms of the types and variety of presentations in which students need to be skilled than either of the other documents. The CCSS include some general requirements, expecting students to describe familiar people and places in Kindergarten, and grow to plan and deliver "focused and coherent presentations that convey clear and distinct perspectives" by the end of high school. The Massachusetts standards require that students in grades 11 and 12 are able to "Deliver formal presentations for particular audiences using clear enunciation and appropriate organization, gestures, tone, and vocabulary." In contrast, California requires more specific skills of its students who at grade 2 should be able to recount an experience or present a story and report on a topic. By grade 5, California students are expected to make narrative and informational presentations and oral responses to literature. By high school, California students are expected to deliver an oral report on an historical investigation; construct a multi-media presentation; orally reflect on the significance of personal experiences, events, conditions, or concerns; and recite poems, selections from speeches, or dramatic soliloquies.

This focus on specific formal presentations, however, is different than the attention the three sets of standards give to speaking and listening skills as part of group discussion. The emphasis of the CCSS and California on class discussion and group work is similar for grades K-5, but at the upper grade levels, particularly grades 9-12, the demand and specificity of CCSS expectations for cooperative work are more extensive than those in California. For example, at the 9-10 grade levels California requires students to "Formulate judgments about the ideas under discussion and support those judgments with convincing evidence."

In contrast, the focus placed by both Massachusetts and the CCSS is very clear. Massachusetts devotes an entire strand to discussion, requiring that students use agreed-upon rules for informal and formal discussions in small and large groups

as well and another standard on “Questioning, Listening, and Contributing” that focuses on students being able to “Pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge.” The CCSS attend to discussion even more specifically. The CCSS provide a clear focus on collaboration beginning in Kindergarten by requiring students to “Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups,” while following “agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others and taking turns speaking about the topics and texts under discussion).” This attention to participating effectively in discussions progresses through all of the grade levels, underscoring the important ways reading, writing, listening, speaking, and working interconnect to explore and solve problems.

### **Progression of Demand:**

The progression of skills and knowledge across the grades is described in a more organized manner in the CCSS than in either the Massachusetts or California standards. Although both California and Massachusetts describe skills that build from grade to grade within their strands, the CCSS are organized completely around ten Reading College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for both informational texts and literature, ten Writing CCR’s, six Speaking and Listening CCR’s, and six Language CCR’s. Each grade level or grade span contains standards that trace back to the organizing principles described in the CCR Standards. Listed in side-by-side arrangements for the grades, the standards clearly communicate the relationship of the requirements of a grade to that before and after it, guaranteeing that the expectation for growth is always at the forefront.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the Common Core State Standards, the California standards, and the Massachusetts standards describe similar bodies of knowledge. All three are similarly rigorous and make clear that curricula should be focused on a tightly defined set of content and skills each year in order for students to build a strong foundational understanding of English Language Arts and literacy. In some areas, however, the CCSS are more focused and coherent than the states. Policymakers can be assured that in adopting the Common Core State Standards, they will be setting learning expectations for students that improve upon those currently set by California and Massachusetts, and that the college- and career-ready bar in the Common Core State Standards is set at a level appropriate to prepare students for success in college and the workplace.

*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](http://www.achieve.org)*