

# A First Look at Common Core ELA & Literacy in Illinois



Taken from “A First Look at the Common Core and College and Career Readiness”

- **Too few students are able to understand complex text.** Relative to the Common Core, only 37% of students are performing at a college- and career-ready level with respect to successfully understanding complex text. The Common Core State Standards define a “staircase” of increasing text complexity designed to move all students to college- and career-ready levels of reading by no later than the end of high school. **To help prepare all students for the challenges of reading at the college and career readiness level, states should ensure that students are reading progressively more complex texts as they advance through the grades.**
- **Increase focus is needed on some key aspects of language.** Two areas of emphasis in the Common Core State Standards are (1) students’ knowledge of language varieties and ability to use language skillfully and (2) students’ ability to acquire and use a rich vocabulary. Relative to the Common Core, only 43% of students are performing at college- and career-ready levels with respect to these skills. To help all students develop a sufficient command of these language skills, states should ensure that students gain sufficient understanding of how language varies by context; how to use language effectively for different audiences, purposes, and tasks; and how to gain and use a vocabulary adequate for college and careers.
  - Students should master the grade-specific standards for Common Core Language Standards 3, which, beginning formally in grade 2 and building throughout the grades, **focuses on such areas as recognizing differences between formal and informal English and between spoken and written English, using language precisely and concisely, and maintaining consistency in style and tone.**
  - Students would also benefit from greater and more systematic attention to vocabulary development. This can include direct vocabulary instruction and a steadily increasing emphasis on helping students acquire vocabulary through reading. Particularly important is that students gain what the Standards refer to as general academic vocabulary: words and phrases that are often encountered in written texts in a variety of subjects but that are rarely heard in spoken language.
- **Content-area reading needs strengthening.** Students struggle when reading texts in content areas, especially in science, where only 28% of students are able to work with science materials at a level that would make them college and career ready. To help all students achieve sufficient literacy skills in history/social studies and in science and technical subjects, as well as in English language arts, states must **ensure that teachers in these subject areas use their unique content knowledge to foster students’ ability to read, write, and communicate in the various disciplines.**
  - Specifically, **English language arts teachers in middle and upper grades should incorporate a particular type of informational text-literary nonfiction-into the traditional curriculum of stories, dramas, and poems.**
  - Teachers in other subject areas should use their own subject-area expertise to help students learn to read, write, and communicate effectively in their specific field.
  - The Common Core State Standards in reading are explicitly modeled on the idea of shared responsibility for students’ literacy development. States and districts should therefore prepare middle and high school content-area teachers for this role by providing professional development opportunities that build the reading instruction capacity of content-area specialists.

**Note:** Percentages reported for “All 11<sup>th</sup> graders” are estimates for all students nationwide based on ACT’s analysis of data from the spring 2010 study described in the Detailed Methodology section at the end of this report. The study sample was composed of students who took the ACT as part of their states’ annual testing programs, spanned the full range of abilities college aspirations, were from a range of communities and schools, and included students tested under standard conditions as well as under accommodations.