

# How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk

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**PIONEER INSTITUTE**  
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# How Common Core's ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk

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### Executive Summary

Our aim in this paper is to convince state and local education policy makers to do two things:

- To emphasize Common Core's existing literary-historical standards, requiring English departments and English teachers to begin with them as they redesign their secondary English curricula.
- To add and prioritize a new literary-historical standard of their own along the lines of "Demonstrate knowledge of culturally important authors and/or texts in British literature from the Renaissance to Modernism."

Far from contradicting Common Core, these actions follow its injunction that, apart from "certain critical content for all students, including: classic myths and stories from around the world, America's Founding Documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare . . . the remaining crucial decisions about what content should be taught are left to state and local determination." In other words, Common Core asks state and local officials to supplement its requirements with their own. It also expects them to help students "systematically acquire knowledge in literature." This paper explains why the two priorities spelled out above are necessary if we seek to use the English curriculum to increase college readiness and the capacity for analytical thinking in all students.

The paper begins by explaining why college readiness will likely decrease when the secondary English curriculum prioritizes literary nonfiction or informational reading and reduces the study of complex literary texts and literary traditions. It then shows that Common Core's division of its reading standards is unwarranted. Common Core itself provides no evidence to support its promise that more literary nonfiction or informational reading in the English class will make all students ready for college-level coursework. In addition, NAEP's reading frameworks, invoked by Common Core itself, provide no support for

Common Core's division of its reading standards into ten for information and nine for literature at all grade levels. Nor do they provide a research base for the percentages NAEP uses for its reading tests. Common Core's architects have inaccurately and without warrant applied NAEP percentages for passage types on its reading tests to the English and reading curriculum, misleading teachers, administrators, and test developers alike.

The paper proceeds with a detailed description of what is present and what is missing in Common Core's literature standards. The deficiencies in Common Core's literature standards and its misplaced stress on literary nonfiction or informational reading in the English class reflect the limited expertise of Common Core's architects and sponsoring organizations. Its secondary English language arts standards were not developed or approved by English teachers and humanities scholars, nor were they research-based or internationally benchmarked.

We conclude by showing how NAEP's criteria for passage selection can guide construction of state-specific tests to ensure that all students, not just an elite, study a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works in high school. Such tests can promote classroom efforts to develop in all students the background knowledge and quality of analytical thinking that authentic college coursework requires.

Common Core believes that more informational readings in high school will improve college readiness, apparently on the sole basis that students in college read mostly informational texts, not literary ones. We know of no research, however, to support that faith. Rather, the history of college readiness in the 20th century suggests that problems in college readiness stem from an incoherent, less-challenging literature curriculum from the 1960s onward. Until that time, a literature-heavy English curriculum was understood as precisely the kind of pre-college training students needed.

The chief problem with a 50/50 division of reading instructional goals in English language arts is its lack of an empirical rationale. NAEP's division of passage types is based on "estimates" of the kinds of reading students do in and outside of school. NAEP expressly denies that its grade 12 reading tests assess the English curriculum, especially since it has (deliberately) never assessed drama. Moreover, the 50/50 division in grades 6-12 makes English teachers responsible for informational reading instruction, something they have not been trained for, and will not be trained for unless the entire undergraduate English major as well as preparatory programs in English education in education schools are changed.

State law typically specifies only that state tests must be based on state standards. Since most states have adopted Common Core's ELA standards as their state standards, and Common Core's College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading are mainly generic reading skills, states can generate state-specific guidelines for a secondary literature curriculum addressing what we recommend above without conflicting with any of Common Core's ELA standards.

Otherwise, state and local policy makers will see the very problems in reading that Common Core aimed to remedy worsen. The achievement gap will persist or widen; while high-achieving students in academically-oriented private and suburban schools may receive rich literary-historical instruction, students in the bottom two-thirds of our student population with respect to achievement, especially those in low-performing schools, will receive non-cumulative, watery training in mere reading comprehension.



### Purpose and Overview

Our aim in this paper is to convince state and local education policy makers to do two things:

- To emphasize Common Core's existing literary-historical standards, requiring English departments and English teachers to begin with them as they redesign their secondary English curricula.
- To add and prioritize a new literary-historical standard of their own along the lines of "Demonstrate knowledge of culturally important authors and/or texts in British literature from the Renaissance to Modernism."

Far from contradicting Common Core, these actions follow its injunction that, apart from "certain critical content for all students, including: classic myths and stories from around the world, America's Founding Documents, foundational American literature, and Shakespeare . . . the remaining crucial decisions about what content should be taught are left to state and local determination."<sup>1</sup> In other words, Common Core asks state and local officials to supplement its requirements with their own ("what content should be taught"). It also expects them to help students "systematically acquire knowledge in literature." This paper explains why the two priorities spelled out above are necessary if we as a nation seek to use the English curriculum to increase college readiness and the capacity for analytical thinking in all students.

Most of those voting to adopt Common Core's standards may well have thought that English coursework in the high school was being strengthened by Common Core. Common Core, however, has never claimed to strengthen either the high school English curriculum or requirements for a high school diploma; it simply claims to make all students "college-ready." As our paper argues, it fails to ensure that goal, and we urge state and local policy makers to bolster their literature standards and reading requirements before it becomes too costly to

repair the damage that Common Core is already doing to the secondary English curriculum, as indicated by the examples we discuss in the concluding section.

This paper begins by explaining why college readiness will likely decrease when the secondary English curriculum prioritizes literary nonfiction or informational reading and reduces the study of complex literary texts and literary traditions. We then show that Common Core's division of its reading standards into ten for information and nine for literature at all grade levels is unwarranted. Common Core itself provides no evidence to support its promise that more literary nonfiction or informational reading in the English class will make all students ready for college-level coursework. In addition, reading frameworks for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), invoked by Common Core itself, provide no support for Common Core's division of its reading standards. Nor do they provide a research base for the percentages NAEP uses for its reading tests. Common Core's architects have inaccurately and without warrant applied NAEP percentages for passage types on its reading tests to the English and reading curriculum, misleading teachers, administrators, and test developers alike.

At the core of this paper is a detailed description of what is present and what is missing in Common Core's literature standards. The deficiencies in Common Core's literature standards and its misplaced stress on literary nonfiction or informational reading in the English class<sup>2</sup> reflect the limited expertise of their architects and sponsoring organizations. Common Core's secondary English language arts standards were not developed or approved by English teachers and humanities scholars, nor were they research-based or internationally benchmarked.

We conclude by showing how NAEP's criteria for passage selection can guide construction of state-specific tests to ensure that all students, not just an elite, study a meaningful range of culturally

and historically significant literary works in high school. Such tests can promote classroom efforts to develop in all students the background knowledge and quality of analytical thinking that authentic college coursework requires.

## **Section I: Does College Readiness Depend on Informational Reading in the English Class?**

We are not aware of any research showing that college readiness depends on any percentage of informational reading in the English class, 50 percent or any other proportion. To the contrary, the relevant information we can locate prompts us to look elsewhere for reasons why large numbers of high school students in this country fail to respond successfully to the challenges of higher education. To make our case, we consider the profile of the high school English curriculum since 1900, the increase in incoherent, less challenging secondary literature curricula from the 1960s onward, and the focus of the 1997 and 2001 Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework and Bay State students' scores on state and national tests.

### **(1) Role of literary study in the high school English curriculum since 1900.**

Literary study assumed a central role in the high school English curriculum around 1900 due to the efforts of the well-known Committee of Ten and a companion committee, both of which convened in the 1890s to work out uniform requirements for college entrance. Their work led to the development of syllabi in English and other subjects that came to be used in public as well as private schools. The English syllabi united literary study with composition and rhetoric, two subjects that had long been in the curriculum, although rhetoric was later removed from the English curriculum and often taught as part of a course in public speaking.

The syllabi developed for high school English classes hastened the evolution of literary content from classical works to chiefly British literature.

By including some relatively contemporary British works, these syllabi helped to establish literary study as a significant part of a modern high school subject that could satisfy college entrance requirements (as Greek, Latin, and mathematics continued to do). These syllabi influenced the high school English curriculum for almost all students until well after World War II.<sup>3</sup> At no time was the focus on literary study in the English classroom considered an impediment to admission to a college; to the contrary, **it was seen as an academic necessity**. Or, to put it another way, at no time did any college recommend a reduction in the literature taught in the high school English class, or an increase in other types of readings, as a way to prepare students more effectively for college.

### **(2) An increasingly incoherent and less challenging high school literature curriculum from the 1960s onward.**

In spite of the massive amount of money (public and private) poured into the K-12 educational system since 1965, when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first authorized, academic results have been consistently disappointing. In the area of English language arts, efforts to improve student performance have been undermined by a gradually weakening secondary English curriculum for the large middle-third of our student population with respect to performance. As a result, remedial coursework at post-secondary public institutions has exploded, abetted by low or open admissions requirements. Overall, the system has become dysfunctional, and the dropout rate for first-year students who need remediation is sky-high. As Michael Kirst has sagely observed, the placement tests given to incoming freshmen in reading, writing, and mathematics in post-secondary public institutions are the real high-stakes tests in this country.<sup>4</sup>

Structural changes from the 1950s on (the break-up of the year-long high school English class, the proliferation of semester electives, and the conversion of junior high schools to middle

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schools) were accompanied by sweeping changes in what students read (more contemporary, shorter works; less difficult works).<sup>5</sup> The structural and content changes reduced the coherence and rigor of the literature/reading curriculum as well as the reading level of textbooks in other subjects. As Common Core's Appendix A acknowledges, "Despite steady or growing reading demands from various sources, K-12 reading texts have actually trended downward in difficulty in the last half-century" (p. 3). Given this background, it is not clear how assigning "informational" texts (whether or not in the form of literary nonfiction) for more than 50 percent of reading instructional time in the secondary English class addresses the failure of "unready" students to acquire adequate reading and writing skills for college coursework.

### **(3) Where a stress on literary study is correlated with high academic performance.**

The 50 percent division was clearly not needed in the one state where all groups of students regularly made gains in the English language arts. Indeed, in this one state, the English language arts curriculum was shaped by exactly the literary-historical richness that is threatened by Common Core's standards. The state is Massachusetts.

The Bay State's own English language arts curriculum framework, considered among the best in the country, was strongly oriented to literary study (and included literary nonfiction). Its major strand was titled Reading and Literature (the other three were Language, Composition, and Media), and it contained two appendices with recommended authors sorted by educational level (now accompanying Common Core's ELA standards, adopted by the state board in 2010, as part of the 15 percent extra allowable by Common Core). The K-8 lists have been vetted regularly by the editors of *The Horn Book* (the major children's literature quarterly in the country) using only literary quality as the criterion, and the high school lists by numerous literary scholars.

The emphasis on literary study was the intent of those who developed the document, and their

work met with the approval of the vast majority of Bay State English teachers. Over the years (from 1997 to 2010), there was almost no criticism of the original document (1997), the revised version (2001), or their literature standards by anyone including the assessment development committees, which met annually from 1997 onward to select passages and develop test items for the state's annual assessments (which were also considered the most rigorous in the country).

The results were impressive. Massachusetts students achieved the highest average scores on NAEP reading tests from 2005 onward in grade 4 and grade 8. The percentage of students enrolled in and passing Advanced Placement literature and language courses remains among the highest in the country.

When the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education surveyed the state's English and reading teachers in 2009 to find out if there were any changes they would recommend for another routine revision of the curriculum framework, less than 30 people in the state bothered to send in comments, only a few of whom were English teachers. At no point did the state's English teachers, as a group or individually, suggest to the Board of Education that a reduction in literary study or an increase in informational reading in the high school English class would make Bay State students better prepared for post-secondary education, whether they were in regular comprehensive high schools or the state's many regional vocational/technical high schools.

### **(4) Why college readiness is increased by the study of complex literary texts.**

Massachusetts' performance marks a striking disconfirmation of Common Core's emphasis on informational text. The fact that a state with literature-heavy standards and tests (about 60% literary/ 40% informational as recommended by the state's English teachers themselves) produced high rates of college-ready graduates, however, makes perfect sense. The reason lies in



the very nature of college readiness as outlined in a document cited authoritatively by Common Core. The first page of Appendix A, “Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards,” mentions a 2006 ACT report titled “Reading Between the Lines,” which reviewed ACT test scores and college readiness in reading. The Appendix summarizes ACT’s conclusion:

Surprisingly, what chiefly distinguished the performance of those students who had earned the benchmark score or better from those who had not was not their relative ability in making inferences while reading or answering questions related to particular cognitive processes, such as determining main ideas or determining the meaning of words and phrases in context. Instead, the clearest differentiator was students’ ability to answer questions associated with complex texts.

As ACT found, high school students who spend hours reading complex texts do better in post-secondary education than students who read chiefly simpler texts. Critical thinking applied to low-complexity texts, it concluded, is inferior to critical thinking applied to high-complexity texts. College readiness depends on skills developed through application to complex texts.

Unfortunately, Common Core draws the wrong conclusion from ACT’s study. It claims that the importance of text complexity argues for fewer literary texts in the K-12 curriculum. Logically, however, it should argue for more complex literary texts in the English curriculum or a greater number of complex literary texts, not more informational texts. ACT’s delineation of the features of complex texts on page 7 of the report demonstrates why.<sup>6</sup>

Complexity is laden with literary features. According to ACT, it involves “characters,” “literary devices,” “tone,” “ambiguity,” “elaborate” structure, “intricate language,” and unclear intentions. Where is language more

“intricate” than in Modernist poems? Where is structure more “elaborate” than in *The Divine Comedy* and *Ulysses*? Where are interactions “among ideas and characters” more “involved” than in a novel by George Eliot or Fyodor Dostoevsky? If complexity contains so much literariness, why reduce literary reading? The case of Massachusetts actually argues for elevating literary readings well above the 50 percent threshold—at least to 60 percent and perhaps to 70 percent.

Common Core doesn’t acknowledge the literariness of text complexity, though. Instead, it provides a spurious rationale for reducing the literary focus of the English classroom. In the section on “Myths vs. Facts,” in a probably hasty response, Common Core tries to address a reasonable concern of many English teachers—that they will have to teach the content of other subjects.

**Myth:** English teachers will be asked to teach science and social studies reading materials.

**Fact:** With the Common Core ELA *Standards*, English teachers will still teach their students literature as well as literary non-fiction. However, because college and career readiness overwhelmingly focuses on complex texts outside of literature, these standards also ensure students are being prepared to read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science. These goals can be achieved by ensuring that teachers in other disciplines are also focusing on reading and writing to build knowledge within their subject areas.

Note that the first sentence, while assuring English teachers that they will still teach what they’ve been trained to teach, doesn’t imply that they will teach literature even 50 percent of the time, never mind most of the time. Then note the assumption in the next two sentences that not only does reading literature and literary nonfiction not develop college readiness (or much of it), but that it is actually developed through complex

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texts “outside literature” and apparently in other subjects. That means, according to Common Core’s architects, that all teachers, including English teachers, must teach reading and writing to “build knowledge” for college readiness. What that “knowledge” is in English, though, we have yet to find out.

There are two problems with this reasoning, one practical and one theoretical. The practical problem lies in the error of making one discipline responsible for college readiness in several disciplines. Common Core may want the pressure to fall on teachers in other areas, too, but the common tests in reading and English will ensure that English teachers alone bear the accountability for readiness in reading. To tell English teachers that they “will still teach their students literature as well as literary nonfiction” is misleading. Once the results of reading-across-the-curriculum college readiness tests come in, reading assignments in the English class will become ever-less-literary. Moreover, English teachers are not secondary reading teachers; English teachers have been trained to teach literature, not reading across the curriculum.

The theoretical problem lies in assuming that studying literary texts will not help students in their comprehension of non-literary texts. In fact, given the high degree of “literariness” in complex texts (according to ACT) and the high college readiness of Massachusetts students, we assume the opposite. One likely reason that strong literary reading supports general college-readiness in reading is that classic literary texts pose strong challenges in vocabulary, structure, style, ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, and irony. In so doing, they build skills that can address a variety of non-literary complex texts. The only logical conclusion one can draw from ACT’s report and its definition of complexity is that students need to read more complex literary works, not more informational ones, especially not popular and “relevant” ones.

How did the English class get its traditional content diminished and distorted in the name of making students more ready for college in general? A literature-heavy English curriculum, properly constructed, yields college-readiness in reading better than an information-heavy English curriculum. And we know of no research showing otherwise.

### **Section II. Unwarranted Division of Reading Instructional Time**

The reduction of literary-historical content in the standards is a necessary consequence of Common Core’s emphasis on informational reading. The nine literature standards and ten informational standards in Common Core’s grade-level standards for reading promote a 50/50 split between literature and informational reading. At the same time, Common Core indicates that the common tests in English language arts now being developed at the high school level must match the 30/70 percentages on the NAEP grade 12 reading test, and that English classes must teach more informational reading or literary nonfiction than ever before. In effect, Common Core yokes the English curriculum to a test of general reading ability! And, in addition, to a test with arbitrary percentages for types of reading that have no basis in research or in informed professional consent, as we shall explain.

NAEP never states that the percentages of types of reading in a curriculum should reflect the percentages designed for a test. Aside from the philosophy that a test should not dictate the content of a curriculum, there is good reason for NAEP’s silence on the matter. NAEP percentages at all educational levels are merely “estimates” devised by advisory reading experts and teachers over the years, based on the unremarkable observation that most students do more informational than literary reading “in their school and out-of-school reading.” NAEP’s percentage-estimates have regularly been approved by its governing board and, for the 2009 reading framework for grade 12, were apparently also approved by “state reading

or assessment directors,” according to Salinger et al.<sup>7</sup> Literary scholars, English department chairs, English teachers, and literature specialists were apparently never asked to examine and approve them, most likely because, since its inception, the grade 12 test had never been considered a test of the high school literature curriculum.

In 2004, NAEP’s governing board asked Achieve to review the reading framework recommended by a committee authorized to revise the framework in place since 1992. The committee had recommended a 40/60 distribution of percentages, but Achieve recommended an increase from 60 percent to 70 percent of the informational passages on the grade 12 NAEP reading test and a decrease from 40 percent to 30 percent for the literary passages (20 percent fiction, five percent poetry, five percent literary nonfiction).<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for further details on the process.

It is important to note that Achieve’s recommended percentages were not based on studies that had quantified the amount and kinds of reading students did inside and outside high school. No such studies exist. Nor were the percentages intended to reflect what students actually read just in the English class. They couldn’t. There is no percentage for drama, for instance, because NAEP has never assessed drama (on the grounds that suitable portions of a play would be too long for a test item). NAEP has steadfastly ignored the fact that Massachusetts has regularly assessed drama on its English language arts tests since 1998, and at all grade levels. Achieve, too, did not recommend assessment of drama.

Keeping in mind that nearly all high school literary reading takes place in English classes, we conclude that Common Core wants future high school English tests to assess informational reading more heavily than literary reading--and only some kinds of literary reading. Did Common Core’s architects not know about the lack of fit between what NAEP’s grade 12 tests assess in literature and what is typically taught in high

school English classes?

Common Core pretends to soften the blow by maintaining that the 70 percent figure it took from the distribution of passages for the grade 12 NAEP reading test does *not* mean that grades 9-12 English classes should *teach* 70 percent informational texts. It goes on to say that this 70 percent must reflect informational reading across the entire high school curriculum. Nevertheless, this requirement inevitably affects the “distribution of texts” on the college readiness test for English language arts. As noted above, 70 percent of NAEP’s high school reading test’s weight rests on informational reading. This can’t be interpreted in any other way.

Two questions immediately arise. How will teachers in other subjects be held accountable for some portion of this 70 percent? How much of that 70 percent will English teachers be held accountable for? 10 percent? 50 percent? 60 percent? Common Core doesn’t say, and in the absence of explicit percentages, we predict that it will fall entirely on the English class. It is hard to imagine that low reading scores in a school district will force grade 11 government/history and science teachers to devote more time to reading instruction. Instead, it is more likely that English teachers will be expected to diminish the number of their literary selections and align readings with test proportions. In any case, so far as we can tell at this point, English teachers are to be held accountable for an unknown percentage of the high school ELA test of college and career readiness.

**(1) No justification for a 50/50 division in the classroom.**

NAEP doesn’t outline instructional expectations for the English classroom or a school curriculum, only the distribution of types of passages for a test. See Figure 1. In pushing an “instructional match” between passage types and readings assigned in English and other classes, Common Core misconstrues the purview of the test itself. It also misreports a key percentage.

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**Figure 1: Percentage of Passages by Text Type and Grade Level, for 2009 Onward on NAEP Reading Tests**

Grade	Literary	Informational
4	(50%) 30% Fiction 10% Literary Nonfiction 10% Poetry	(50%) 40% Exposition 10% Argumentation/Persuasive* (2–4 embedded within Procedural texts)
8	(45%) 20% Fiction 15% Literary Nonfiction 10% Poetry	(55%) 30% Exposition 25% Argumentation/Persuasive (2–3 embedded within Procedural texts)
12	(30%) 20% Fiction 5% Literary Nonfiction 5% Poetry	(70%) 30% Exposition 30% Argumentation/Persuasive (2–3 embedded within Procedural texts) and/or 10% Stand-Alone Procedural

Source: Exhibit 8 in <http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/reading-2011-framework.pdf>.

NAEP specifications say that literary nonfiction should account for only 5 percent of the grade 12 test, not 50 percent or some portion thereof. Where did the architects of Common Core’s ELA standards get the idea that literary nonfiction belonged in the informational category? Where did they get the 50 percent teaching division from? We don’t know. Perhaps they thought that the 50/50 division between types of passages for the grade 4 tests was for the curriculum, and then extended NAEP’s percentages for a grade 4 test to the entire public school curriculum. So far, the architects have provided no rationale even for organizing a 50/50 division of reading standards in grades 6-12 between informational text and literature, never mind a heavy emphasis on literary nonfiction.

### **(2) Misread source of the 30/70 mandate for the common test.**

The 30/70 mandate for the common test also reflects a misunderstanding of what NAEP reading tests purport to assess and whom NAEP considers accountable. The specifications for NAEP’s current grade 12 reading test indicate

that test items are to measure “students’ comprehension of the different kinds of text they encounter **in their in-school and out-of-school reading experiences**” [emphasis added]. There is more: “Stimulus material must be of the highest quality, and it must come from authentic sources such as those students would encounter in their in-school and out-of school reading”; and “...the assessment as a whole reflects the full range of print and noncontinuous text that students encounter in their in-school and out-of-school reading.”

In fact, both types of NAEP reading tests (the long-term trend tests beginning in 1971 and the main tests beginning in 1992) were designed to reflect the reading students do outside of school as well as across the curriculum. The distance of NAEP reading passages from a typical English class becomes obvious when we consider two examples. The first one, on the 2005 NAEP grade 12 reading test, is part of a pamphlet guide to the Washington, DC, Metro system; it generated such questions as “According to the guide, how long are Metrobus transfers valid?” The second one, on the 2009 NAEP grade 12 reading test, is a copy of a housing rental agreement, followed by questions including “According to the rental agreement, what is the first action the landlord will take if the rent is not paid on time?” The reading tests include literary passages, too, but such flatly informational materials with no literary elements whatsoever (as opposed to literary nonfiction) mark a distance that the English curriculum cannot cross and remain an English curriculum. It is clear that the architects of Common Core’s ELA standards improperly extended the purview of NAEP’s assessment specifications.



The NAEP reading assessment frameworks also make it clear that student performance is the responsibility of more than teachers and schools.<sup>9</sup>

On p. 6, we find:

NAEP assesses reading skills that students use in all subject areas and in their out-of-school and recreational reading. By design, many NAEP passages require interpretive and critical skills usually taught as part of the English curriculum. However, NAEP is an assessment of varied reading skills, not a comprehensive assessment of literary study. The development of the broad range of skills that the nation's students need to read successfully in both literary and informational texts is the responsibility of teachers across the curriculum, as well as of parents and the community.

That NAEP considers parents and the community also responsible for NAEP reading scores shows that NAEP percentages for reading passage types are inappropriate as a driver of the English curriculum. To use NAEP's percentages as a model for the English syllabus is, in effect, to convert the latter into a reading comprehension course and to make English teachers bear the full burden of reading skills, a burden properly shared by reading teachers, parents, and teachers across the curriculum.

**To summarize, Common Core's stipulations for the English class have no basis in research, in NAEP documents, or in informed consent, and NAEP's percentages for passage types have no basis in research at any educational level.**

### **Section III: The Presence and Absence of Literary Study in Common Core**

#### **(1) What Common Core requires**

Common Core's English Language Arts Standards contain standards that can raise literary-historical study to rigorous levels. For Grades 9-10, the literature standards include:

RL.9-10.6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

RL.9-10.9. Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

For Grades 11-12, the literature section goes further:

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

RL.11-12.9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.<sup>10</sup>



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These requirements are supported by three standards for informational texts (note the presence of the term “literary significance” in two of them):

RI.9-10.9. Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’), including how they address related themes and concepts.

RI.11-12.8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

RI.11-12.9. Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Finally, the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading terminate with this important pronouncement (or show it in a sidebar in some web-based versions).

### **Note on range and content of student reading**

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students’ own thinking and writing. Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare.

Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts.<sup>11</sup>

The language is strong and clear: “wide reading of world literature,” “foundational texts and documents,” “historical and literary significance,” materials from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, “classics.” It articulates the premises of a vigorous literature curriculum, insisting on readings from long ago, prescribing certain texts and authors, and distinguishing the significant from the insignificant. These standards oblige high school English teachers to survey a wide range of great literature of historical consequence.

To acquire knowledge of “eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature,” students must cover several thousand pages of complicated, profound, and influential literary expression, as well as 300+ years of social and historical context. The presence of “seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare” sets a high criterion for the reading assignments. The broad “range” and “exceptional” quality of selections decree that a few choices from the Bard and the American literary tradition won’t suffice. Students must read a rich, cumulative corpus of great works.

These requirements presume breadth and excellence both in the readings and in the literary-historical knowledge of the teacher. The difficulty and remoteness of many of these works call for extensive scaffolding, for instance, historical information about the Puritans in order for students to understand the setting of Hawthorne’s fiction. The “foundational” and “classic” nature of these required works adds another dimension as well, one that expands beyond the individual texts themselves. Students read “Bartleby,” *The Red Badge of Courage*, “The Yellow Wallpaper,”

and other classics as distinct compositions, analyzing plot, character, theme, and style in each one. But they also contextualize them, fit them into relationships with elements outside them. These elements include other texts that came before and after them, aspects of American social and political life represented in the text, national ideals and character, and broader cultural movements and artistic schools.

We proceed past basic comprehension of the text and build up what the above “Note” terms “a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge.” The readings on the syllabus stand not merely as discrete samples of great literature. They accumulate into a tradition, a “story,” so to speak, one that enriches each entry in it. If a teacher chooses *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* for a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade class, students comprehend it all the more if they explore the conditions of Jim Crow in the 1950s and read some of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Indeed, such contexts aren’t external to basic comprehension, but essential to it. For instance, *Invisible Man* loses much of its meaning if students have no knowledge of Booker T. Washington.

In other words, knowledge of individual classic texts and awareness of American literary tradition are dictated by literary-historical statements in Common Core. There is no other way to interpret the blunt assertion “Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature” or to narrow the range of readings to less than “across genres, cultures, and centuries.” Common Core’s high school English standards contain resolute literary-historical obligations, necessitating a syllabus filled with classics through the ages, instilling in students a broad, comprehensive awareness of tradition, not just familiarity with selected discrete texts.

But how binding are these standards? And how well supported by other demands in the document?

**(2) What the right hand giveth, the left hand taketh away.**

Unfortunately, these praiseworthy content requirements lack the accompanying machinery necessary to guarantee translation into curriculum and study in the classroom. They stand firm in the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading and the grade-level reading standards for Literature, but Common Core fails to back them up by specifying the contents of literary-historical knowledge and the criteria by which a text would qualify for selection. Apart from Shakespeare and a few informational documents, authors and titles are missing. The terms “exceptional” and “foundational” are not defined, and the discussion of “text complexity” in Common Core’s Appendix A does not emphasize texts whose difficulty derives from their literary-historical nature (perhaps for reasons we give below). The missing components of literary-historical machinery are easy to identify.

**No list of recommended authors and titles.** If the standards do not identify which works qualify as “foundational” and “classic,” literary-historical knowledge remains vague. Teachers and schools must decide on their own what will fill the English curriculum, a system that promotes inconsistency and lower standards across districts. It suggests that the content of literary tradition is unsettled and arbitrary, a contention that may be true at the edges (for example, the discovery of a neglected author), but not at the center (Melville, Wharton, and Faulkner are fixtures now and in the future).

We recognize the discomfort many people feel with the fact that literature in English before 1800 is authored almost entirely by white males, but this is no reason to allow literary-historical knowledge of those areas to disappear from the classroom. We note, too, that under its grade-level standards for informational reading Common Core does single out specific texts for study, implicitly recognizing that those texts may drop off the syllabus if they do not. We see no reason for not doing the same for foundational literary texts.

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### *No historical period coverage requirements.*

Literary history is arranged chronologically with subdivisions by cultural and social categories. Traditionally, dividing the history of literature written in English begins philologically with Old English (*Beowulf*), Middle English (Chaucer *et al*), and Modern English (roughly, the Renaissance and after). The Modern Period has fallen into various sub-categories over the years: Elizabethan, Cavalier, Restoration, Augustan, 18<sup>th</sup>-century, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist. American literature spans the Puritans, Colonial and Early Republic, American Renaissance, Realism and Naturalism, Modernism. Some labels are no longer in use and we do not insist on maintaining them, but some chronological arrangement is necessary. Organizing assigned texts into meaningful groupings serves an educational purpose. Without them, the English curriculum is a random assembly of literary and non-literary texts. Common Core does order teachers to select works from different centuries, but imparts nothing about the connections between them. It solicits a mixture of older and newer, but doesn't ask students to interpret them together as pieces in one or more traditions.

### *No British literature aside from Shakespeare.*

On grounds of influence alone, the absence of British literature from Common Core is a serious deficiency. Schools may design a curriculum that fully aligns with Common Core yet produce students who never have to read anything produced in the British Isles save for two Shakespeare plays. Certainly the foundational authors in American literature avidly read the King James Version of The Bible, Milton, Swift, Pope, Wordsworth, Byron, and others, and their works become clearer in the light of British Romanticism, Restoration Satire, etc. British literature forms the literary heritage of our own language, too, and it offers models of prose style from Addison to Orwell that are still useful in composition classes. For much of the 20th century, British literature held the center of high school English, and it still pops up in college courses in composition, English, history,

linguistics, film, and cultural studies. We find no explanation in Common Core for dispensing with it.

*No philology.* One of the first principles of the language and literature fields is that language is a historical practice. It changes over time and from place to place. Words appear and disappear, styles rise and fall, verbal media are invented and abandoned. In Common Core's grade-level Language strand is a heading "Knowledge of Language," yet it completely overlooks the philological axiom, focusing instead on usage and comprehension (for example, "Use verbs in the active and passive voice and in the conditional and subjunctive mood to achieve particular effects"). In doing so, Common Core downplays the historical understanding of language, a capacity that advances students' ability to handle certain kinds of text complexity. Philology turns language into an explicit object of study, making students more conscious of the words they read and write. Philology also sets the history of the English (and American) language amidst a long foreground of world events and geography, including different regions and demographic groups. No literature curriculum is complete without a history of the language itself.

*A 50 percent division.* Common Core's reading standards for K-12 are divided into 10 for information and 9 for literature. Common Core's authors insist that at least half of English course readings be informational text (to include literary nonfiction), leaving literary reading at one-half or less (although nothing in the standards themselves requires 50/50 teaching).<sup>12</sup> But the literary-historical knowledge demands of Common Core, if interpreted correctly, cannot be met on a half-time schedule. The amount of context and sheer number of pages exceed what even the most efficient teacher can assign and discuss, given the 50-percent informational text rule.

The only way to meet literary-historical standards and establish a 50 percent division of titles is for an English teacher to make all the informational

assignments complementary to the literary assignments. Informational readings should either come directly from the foundational/classic corpus (we may treat Franklin's *Autobiography*, Emerson's essays, *Walden*, important speeches such as Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" and other non-fiction, non-poetic, non-dramatic classics as informational texts) or apply directly to them (for example, assigning essays about *Huckleberry Finn* as well as the novel itself). Informational texts should be part of the literary tradition or scaffolding for it, and the 50/50 divide shouldn't appear to be a division at all. All the reading materials should reinforce one another and unite into a coherent literary curriculum. But Common Core makes no such recommendation for informational texts. A teacher may jump from William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, an 1885 novel about an awkward Yankee capitalist, to news stories about Occupy Wall Street without violating the standards, or skip from a poem by Phillis Wheatley to a commentary on the history of American racism by Henry Louis Gates (that says nothing specific about Wheatley's actual poems) and turn literary study into a social studies lesson, again without violating the standards.<sup>13</sup>

**Restricted view of text complexity.** Common Core rightly insists that students read progressively more challenging materials as they move from grade to grade. The elements of text complexity are laid out in Common Core's Appendix A, and they comprise obvious textual features such as "multiple levels of meaning," "unconventional structure," "sophisticated graphics," "ambiguous language," and "multiple perspectives."

They also mention aspects of unfamiliarity that we might attribute to the historical distance of a text, citing "archaic language" and "cultural/literary knowledge." But neither one is expounded any further. Indeed, "knowledge" is related more to "readers' life experiences" than to readers' historical understanding. That is, knowledge deficits arise not because a text dates from 250

years earlier, but because the texts broaches subject matter that the reader hasn't experienced first-hand. As a result, text complexity as defined by Common Core bypasses a common reason for complexity problems for high school students.

As NAEP U.S. history scores repeatedly demonstrate, the historical knowledge of 12<sup>th</sup> graders is meager. For most of them, the plot, setting, and society of, for instance, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) are completely alien. The difficulty students have in understanding the novel stems from the widespread problem that E. D. Hirsch addressed in the Core Knowledge curriculum: low background knowledge. In omitting historical remoteness from text complexity, then, Common Core not only lightens the literary-historical burden of the standards. It also overlooks a predominant reason why so many students falter when assigned complex texts.

In addition, nowhere does Common Core caution that complex texts with low readability levels (e.g., *The Hunger Games*) should not dominate the high school literature curriculum. It could easily have done so in the section on "Myths vs. Facts," part of which we reproduce below, instead of setting up a strawman and then providing a mostly irrelevant answer.

**Myth:** The *Standards* suggest teaching *The Grapes of Wrath* to second graders.

**Fact:** The ELA *Standards* suggest *The Grapes of Wrath* as a text that would be appropriate for 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade readers. Evidence shows that the complexity of texts students are reading today does not match what is demanded in college and the workplace, creating a gap between what high school students can do and what they need to be able to do. The Common Core State Standards create a staircase of increasing text complexity, so that students are expected to both develop their skills and apply them to more and more complex texts.



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All English teachers know that *The Grapes of Wrath* is not for second graders, and **no one** has suggested that Common Core recommends it for grade 2. What teachers need to be reminded of, which “Fact” doesn’t say, is that text complexity and readability levels don’t always correspond. There are texts with high complexity and low readability levels, and secondary teachers should ensure an appropriate balance between complex texts with and without high readability levels. Common Core should have warned against letting subjective judgments about text complexity always trump objective measures of text difficulty, lest teachers have too much license in selecting course readings and assessment developers excessive latitude in arraying test items at any one grade level.

In sum, these omissions and opposing pressures dilute and delimit the literary-historical standards in Common Core. Teachers dedicated to a strong literary-historical curriculum may cite Common Core in defense of a traditional syllabus of English literature from *The Canterbury Tales* to *1984*, but teachers uninterested in that tradition may satisfy Common Core standards with one Shakespeare play, *The Declaration of Independence*, some poems by Walt Whitman, and the rest contemporary literature. The intent of part of Common Core is to roster a rich literary-historical syllabus, but it won’t be realized unless teachers share that intent. If teachers do not share it, Common Core poses little resistance.

### Section IV: How to Increase College Readiness and Analytical Thinking in the English Class

State law typically specifies only that state tests have to be based on state standards. Since most states have adopted Common Core’s ELA standards as their state standards, and Common Core’s College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading are mainly generic reading skills (see them in Appendix B), states can generate state-specific guidelines for a

secondary literature curriculum addressing what we recommend above without conflicting with Common Core’s grade-level literature standards. They can ask English teachers to teach literature for 70 percent of the time, and literary nonfiction (or other informational texts) for no more than 30 percent of the time.

In essence, they can create an additional set of state standards focused only on literature. The literature standards will have subsets to them: (1) standards that clarify and build upon the existing literary-historical standards in Common Core (some world literature, classic myths and stories, Shakespeare, foundational American literature); and (2) standards that extend literary-historical study in the directions outlined above that are not in Common Core (British literature from Chaucer to Joyce and some history of the English language). See Appendix C for descriptions of courses that address these proposed additional standards.

The first general set will be assessed by the common tests. The second set, including all subsets, can be assessed by a state-level assessment similar to the old New York Regents exam (essay-type). No law or regulation says that states cannot have an additional set of literary standards or that they must be similar across states. A legislature or state board of education can make the additional assessment mandatory for schools and require a passing score for a high school diploma or college admission.

#### (1) How to locate adequate standards to guide secondary literature curricula and tests.

Some states will find useful literary guidelines in their own abandoned English language arts standards. Not to sustain the literary values in existing state standards is to lower the knowledge requirements currently in place. Appendix D lists several states with stronger standards for a literature curriculum than Common Core’s, as judged by an independent source. (It is not an inclusive list; some other states also had better guidelines than Common Core’s—and for more



than the literature curriculum.) States unable to find useful literary standards in what they discarded—the justification their state boards of education may have given for adopting Common Core’s—should feel free to copy from states that were judged to have literary standards superior to Common Core’s.

**(2) Where to find appropriate test items for these standards in the U.S.**

The best source, for a start, may be the released items from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. Below are two test items from the Bay State’s grade 8 test and two test items from its grade 10 test for two different years, each item reflecting its corresponding grade-level standard in Figure 2 in Appendix B. Both the passages and the questions in these test items address Common Core’s generic Anchor skills and most literature standards at these grade levels.

In 2007, a passage from *Gilgamesh* Book III was a test item in grade 8. It is described as follows:

The epic of *Gilgamesh* dates from 1700 BC but was only discovered in AD 1853, buried in the ruins of Nineveh, in present-day Iraq. Written on clay tablets, it relates the life and adventures of a famous king, Gilgamesh, and his best friend, Enkidu. Read the excerpt from *Gilgamesh* and answer the questions that follow.

Here is one multiple-choice question:

Which of the following elements of an epic is established in stanza 1 of the excerpt?

- A. the hero’s task
- B. the story’s moral
- C. the gods’ character
- D. the hero’s love interest

In 2008, a passage from *The Iliad* by Homer (translated by Robert Fagles) was a test item in grade 8. It is described as follows:

The following myth is from the Greek epic *The Iliad*. In the myth, Achilles has organized a footrace in which his friends Ajax, Odysseus, and Antilochus run against one another. Read the myth and answer the questions that follow.

Here is one multiple-choice question:

Read lines 47–49 in the box below.

“Foul, by heaven! The goddess fouled my finish!/Always beside Odysseus—just like the man’s mother,/rushing to put his rivals in the dust.”

What is the reason for Ajax’s frustration?

- A. He is disappointed in the way he ran.
- B. He believes Odysseus’s mother helped Odysseus win.
- C. He thinks the goddess Athena’s interference made him lose.
- D. He wishes he had been competing against an easier opponent.

In 2007, a passage from Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* was a test item in grade 10. It is described as follows:

In this chapter from *Mythology*, author Edith Hamilton retells the story of King Ceyx and his faithful wife, Queen Alcyone. Read the myth and answer the questions that follow.

Here is one multiple-choice question:

According to paragraphs 6–7, what motivates Alcyone to return to the headland?

- A. She plans to take a journey across the sea.
- B. She hopes to find a cure for her sleeplessness.
- C. She wishes to ask the oracle about her dream.
- D. She wants to be close to her drowned husband.

In 2009, a passage from *The Aeneid* by Virgil (translated by Robert Fagles) was a test item in grade 10. It is described as follows:

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After being defeated by the Greeks and cast out of Troy, members of the Trojan army are forced to wander the Mediterranean and look for a new home. The Trojans, including the narrator, Aeneas, and his father, Anchises, attempt to settle on the island of Crete, but the gods visit Aeneas in a dream to reveal their intentions for his people. Read the excerpt from Virgil’s *Aeneid*....

Here is the open response question for this test item:

Based on the excerpt, describe the Trojans’ relationship with the gods. Support your answer with relevant and specific information from the excerpt.

### (3) Where to find appropriate examples elsewhere.

Examples from the exit exam for literary study in British Columbia, Canada, are in Appendix E. They show what another English-speaking region expects high school students to study—a far cry from Common Core’s literature standards, and evidence that Common Core’s English language arts standards are not internationally benchmarked. Other English-speaking regions can also provide useful test items.

## Section V. Policy Recommendations

States and districts can address the literary-historical deficiencies in Common Core’s English language arts standards first by rigorously adhering to its existing literary-historical standards and then by adding some literary-historical standards of their own. Common Core poses no constraints here, since almost any literary work can meet a College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard in Reading, and only a few grade-level standards point to specific literary periods, works, or authors. Moreover, added literary-historical standards will make it difficult for schools to adopt a hodge-podge of informational texts to satisfy Common Core’s quota of over 50 percent informational reading (whether or not the texts are called literary nonfiction).

Because Common Core’s standards require neither the systematic, copious study of literary traditions nor sufficient acquisition of literary-historical knowledge, it is up to state and local education policy makers and legislators to develop curricular materials that do. To ensure an intellectually and civically sound literature curriculum in our public schools, state and local education leaders need to set forth guidelines they want local curriculum developers to follow in constructing a secondary literature curriculum. These guidelines could encompass an extra 15 percent allowed by Common Core itself (if their state doesn’t withdraw from Common Core and hasn’t already created that extra 15 percent for English language arts) or state-specific literature standards if their state does withdraw from Common Core.

Useful guidelines for the secondary literature curriculum may be found in some states’ abandoned English language arts curriculum frameworks and can continue to undergird their own state assessments of state-specific standards. Many states, however, will not be able to find useful literary standards in what they discarded. Education leaders in these states could look for guidelines in the English language arts curriculum framework for the state—Massachusetts—that has empirically demonstrated higher student achievement on NAEP reading tests than all other states. They can also ask experienced high school English teachers in their own state to devise professional guidelines for a coherent literature curriculum in their public high schools, as suggested in a book by the second author.<sup>14</sup>

These teacher-developed guidelines could also be used by the testing consortia funded by the USDE to develop common tests. In order to generate test items with some relevance to a studied curriculum, these consortia have crafted their own models, guidelines, even lesson plans for a secondary literature curriculum, and they expect many schools to use them before if not after common testing begins in 2014.

**(1) Why NAEP’s criteria for passage selection should be used.**

Despite Common Core’s injunction that passage type in the high school English test should reflect percentages in the NAEP high school reading assessment, we do not yet know whether the criteria the testing consortia are using for passage selection are those that NAEP test developers are supposed to use. NAEP explicitly says that “texts will reflect our literary heritage by including significant works from varied historical periods.” Fidelity to this criterion remains to be verified in the tests developed by the two testing consortia. As of mid-August 2012, the documents that the two testing consortia have released to the public are unclear or ambiguous, suggesting a disregard for mandated literary-historical content.

A public comment draft on defining college readiness issued by the Partnership for the Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) is one example.<sup>15</sup> Entitled “PARCC College-Ready Determination in ELA/Literacy and Mathematics,” the draft claims that it “creates high-quality assessments that measure the full range of the Common Core State Standards” and it affirms that the “knowledge and skills contained in the Common Core State Standards are necessary for success in both postsecondary education and the workplace.” But when PARCC outlines what its tests will demonstrate, not one speck of Common Core’s literary-historical knowledge appears.

For example, under the heading of “content claims,” PARCC spotlights “Full comprehension of a range of complex literary and informational texts by drawing relevant evidences from texts to construct effective arguments and analyses” and “Use of context to effectively determine the meaning of words and phrases.” Nothing on foundational documents or classic texts, and nothing that specifies a multi-century “range” of texts (Common Core mandates all three). In contrast, when PARCC turns to mathematics, it asks that students “Solve most problems involving the major content for their grade with connection

to the Standards for Mathematical Practice.” Here PARCC acknowledges that each grade has mandated mathematics content that assessments must cover. In omitting “major content” from ELA, PARCC implies that Common Core’s ELA standards have none.

This is a serious oversight with far-reaching consequences for English. Right now, PARCC will guide curriculum and classroom practices for more than 25 million public school students. If the final design matches this initial proposal, those students will receive English instruction lightened of its proper literary-historical content.

The other testing consortium, Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) also provides test specifications with no details on content. Moreover, its recently released sample test items show how subjective judgments about complexity trump text difficulty.<sup>16</sup> Most of the passages for assessing grade 11 reading skills cannot usefully assess college readiness because they are short excerpts and/or are lower than grade 11 in readability level (the Robert Frost poem is the only selection that is whole, can stand on its own, and whose readability level is not useful because it is a poem). Placement on a grade 11 test was apparently justified for the others because their “language” had been judged “very complex” or “exceedingly complex.” For students who don’t read very much and whose curriculum had never included anything written before 1990, it is indeed possible that the language of excerpts from an Ambrose Bierce and a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle short story might seem highly complex.

The use of short excerpts by SBAC raises a different problem. A paragraph by John Locke and a small portion of a Susan B. Anthony speech have been selected for comparison but cannot in fact be compared, despite SBAC’s mistaken (as well as inappropriate) leading question asking students to show how Locke’s point supports Anthony’s. These two excerpts address unrelated (though not contradictory) points, points heavily shaped by different historical contexts (Locke

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was supporting the legitimacy of government so long as natural rights were respected). Without historical knowledge and a more extensive selection (in this case, of Locke’s ideas), interpretation of historically-situated documents is handicapped.

In contrast, the sample passages for grade 10 recently released by PARCC demonstrate the use of whole selections (and a clear expectation for high school level reading at the high school level) for the testing of reading.<sup>17</sup> The sample questions center on a comparison of “Daedalus and Icarus” by Ovid and a poem by Anne Sexton that is related in content. However, we do not know how typical the use of whole selections will be in other PARCC items for determining college readiness.

How can the public be assured that test items in both reading and mathematics are properly vetted by content experts? How will the public know how demanding the college readiness tests developed by both testing consortia really are? Can Congress require the USDE (which funds both testing consortia) to appoint independent groups of academic experts to approve in advance all test items and report to Congress, and to require release to the public of all used test items within a year after the tests are given and the cut scores have been determined?

### **(2) What states and local school districts can do.**

State law typically specifies only that state tests have to be based on state standards. Since most states have adopted Common Core’s standards as their state standards, and Common Core’s College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards point to no particular educational level or texts, all states need to do in order to align with Common Core’s standards is to ensure that their test items follow NAEP’s literary guidelines.

If state and local school administrators do not require relevant literary/historical nonfiction to accompany the diminished number of literary

works taught under the Common Core mandate (if they choose to follow it), secondary students will end up reading a fluctuating body of nonfiction texts. Whether or not this hodge-podge satisfies Common Core’s quota of 50 percent informational text, it will reduce students’ understanding of whatever literature they do read. In doing so, the curriculum will deplete the college readiness that Common Core professes to aim for. To avoid an impoverished literature curriculum, English departments need to develop syllabi for each secondary grade that contribute to a coherent understanding of American and British literary/cultural history and the development of the English language (the purpose of the suggestions in Appendix C).

## **Section VI. Conclusions**

Common Core’s standards for English language arts, their organization, and their division, in effect, make it unlikely that American students will study a meaningful range of culturally and historically significant literary works in high school and learn something about their own literary tradition before graduation. A diminished emphasis on literary study will also prevent students from acquiring a rich understanding and use of the English language, a development that requires exposure to the language and thinking of the most talented writers of English through the centuries. The stress on more informational reading in the English class will also likely lead to a decreased capacity for analytical thinking in all students. Why? Apart from the previously mentioned literariness of ACT’s complex-text traits, we see another danger in the emphasis on informational text.

Informational texts (whether or not literary nonfiction) are often assigned today not for their complexity and promotion of college readiness in reading but for their topical and/or political nature. Clear examples can be found in a volume published in 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to show teachers how to implement Common Core’s standards.



It bears the title *English Language Arts, Grades 9-12*. The main author is Sarah Brown Wessling, a high school English teacher in Iowa who was named 2010 Teacher of the Year, a prize given by the Council of Chief State School Officers, sponsor of Common Core. Where better to find an authoritative derivation of the English curriculum from Common Core standards in order to judge both the fate of literary study and the kinds of reading an informational emphasis will evoke?

Wessling's informational preferences were revealed in a March 14, 2012 article in *Education Week*.

[Wessling's] students are analyzing the rhetoric in books about computer geeks, fast food, teenage marketing, the working poor, chocolate-making, and diamond-mining. They were allowed to choose books about those real-world topics as part of a unit on truth. Students are also dissecting the sources, statistics, and anecdotes the authors use to make their arguments in books like *Branded* by Alissa Quart and *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich.

Some readers may not know that *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* is a 2003 trade book about marketing to teens, and *Nickel and Dimed* is an anti-capitalist tract presented as a diary about the author's three-month experiences as a low-wage worker.

The NCTE volume follows the same track, showing how even works with literary-historical importance are subordinated to contemporary informational texts. To contextualize and "scaffold" *The Odyssey*, for example, Wessling doesn't add readings in ancient Greek history and social life or assign other ancient poems. Instead, she chooses "*Star Wars* and some excerpts from Joseph Campbell . . . juxtaposing *The Odyssey* with an NPR piece on veterans and violence along with excerpts from the *Frontline* episode 'A Soldier's Heart'" (p. 26).

Clearly, an understanding of *The Odyssey* on its own terms and literary-historical knowledge in general isn't the aim. Rather, certain ideas about heroism, war, and society are, and the presentation ends up focusing on "context texts" that "create a reservoir of prior knowledge that gives context to the complexities of further reading." These context texts comprise a mode of "pre-reading" that purports to disclose the main text and expand its significance to broader cultural and social realities. But will students pay closer attention to *The Odyssey* after they watch *Star Wars*? Or will they, instead, "modernize" *The Odyssey* to the point that it loses its literary-historical character and no longer stands as the main text?

Wessling and her co-authors turn this contemporary contextualization into a set practice. Their list of context text genres includes film excerpts, blogs, radio shows, podcasts, and graphic novels – materials that often work against the purpose of unveiling the main text. The authors of the NCTE volume do not try to justify these kinds of context texts as superior to contextual materials that emerge out of the same historical situation as the main text. We have no rationale for why, for instance, a blog about Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is preferable to 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century accounts of the French Revolution. Indeed, the whole question of which texts and contexts are the best ones disappears. The selection of contextual materials is given not a content-based rationale, but a methodological one, namely, pedagogy: "*How* the texts are used to scaffold the reading experience takes precedence over which texts are chosen" (p. 25). In other words, the mandated literary-historical content of Common Core is gone.

Indeed, its literary-historical standards and the "Note on range and content" exercise no influence. For the authors of this NCTE volume, Common Core lays out only what students should be able to do, not what they should know. Even at the high school level, when college readiness increases in importance, they write: "the CCSS focus is on skills, strategies, and habits that will



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enable students to adapt to the rhetorical demands of their future learning and contributions” (p. 16). Nowhere do the authors distinguish between popular and contemporary works and the “seminal” and “classic” works required by Common Core.

As the NCTE volume illustrates, more informational texts in the English class will produce less rigorous English classes than we already have if teachers assign more topical, present-oriented, and “relevant” readings that lack the literary craft and historical remoteness demanded by Common Core’s literary-historical standards and text complexity requirements. Unfortunately, Common Core builds in no constraints to their use as invitations to address adolescent “relevance” or to turning the analysis of a literary text into a social studies lesson.

Because Common Core’s 50/50 division for the English class cannot help but reduce the presence of literary fiction, poetry, and drama in the curriculum, the responsibility for restoring British, American, and World literary traditions to the curriculum falls upon K-12 curriculum directors, English departments, and publishers of literature anthologies. Syllabi (and anthologies) for each course or grade need to include readings of high literary quality that contribute to a coherent understanding of specific literary and cultural histories—for instance, a 10<sup>th</sup>-grade syllabus made up of some of the recognized works of Russian literature from the early 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, or a 12<sup>th</sup>-grade syllabus made up of recognized works of British literature from the Renaissance to the Victorian period. Syllabi and anthologies also need to incorporate nonfiction texts written by important authors that complement the imaginative literary content in some way, for instance, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s lecture for the 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature, Samuel Johnson’s preface on Shakespeare, and John Keats’s letters on poetry.

We can’t help but wonder if the case for more informational texts and increasing complexity (but not necessarily text difficulty) is a camouflage for lowering academic challenge so that more high school students will appear college-ready upon (or perhaps before) graduation. The next battle, we predict, will shift upward in the education scale and determine how many of these weak students can graduate from college and be considered eligible for graduate-level work or employment.

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## ■ How Common Core’s ELA Standards Place College Readiness at Risk

### Endnotes

1. <http://www.corestandards.org/asests/CoreFacts.pdf>

2. From Common Core: “Fulfilling the Standards for 6–12 ELA requires much greater attention to a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—than has been traditional. Because the ELA classroom must focus on literature (stories, drama, and poetry) as well as literary nonfiction, a great deal of informational reading in grades 6–12 must take place in other classes if the NAEP assessment framework is to be matched instructionally. To measure students’ growth toward college and career readiness, assessments aligned with the Standards should adhere to the distribution of texts across grades cited in the NAEP framework.”

As we note elsewhere, we do not know how these “other classes” will be assessed on informational reading instruction. Nor is it clear how much informational reading must take place in the English class to achieve the “instructional match” desired by Common Core.

3. See John Valentine. (1987). *The College Board and the School Curriculum: A History of the College Board’s Influence on the Substance and Standards of American Education, 1900-1980*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board; see also George Tanner. (1907). Report of the Committee Appointed by the English Conference to Inquire into the Teaching of English in the High Schools of the Middle West, *School Review*, 15: 37-45.

4. <http://www.highereducation.org/crosstalk/ct0107/voices0107-kirst.shtml>

5. Sandra Stotsky. (2012). *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum*, Rowman & Littlefield.

6. According to ACT, a complex text can be described with respect to the following six aspects:

- Relationships: Interactions among ideas or characters in the text are subtle, involved, or deeply embedded.
- Richness: The text possesses a sizable amount of highly sophisticated information conveyed through data or literary devices.
- Structure: The text is organized in ways that are elaborate and sometimes unconventional.
- Style: The author’s tone and use of language are often intricate.
- Vocabulary: The author’s choice of words is demanding and highly context dependent.
- Purpose: The author’s intent in writing the text is implicit and sometimes ambiguous.

7. Terry Salinger, Michael Kamil, Barbara Kapinus, and Peter Afflerbach. (2005). Development of a New Framework for the NAEP Reading Assessment. *National Reading Conference Yearbook*. 54, pp. 334-348.

8. Achieve. (2005). *Analysis of the 2009 Reading Framework in the context of the college and workplace preparedness benchmarks of the American Diploma Project: Report of the major recommendations of the Achieve panel*.

9. <http://www.nagb.org/publications/frameworks/reading-2011-framework.pdf>

10. During the early spring of 2010, the second author was asked by Michael Cohen, president of Achieve, Inc., and by Sandy Kress, with the James B. Hunt Institute at the time of his call, for suggested standards to add to Common Core’s English language arts standards. To address the lack of cultural/historical markers in the “Anchor” reading standards, she recommended adding the first two literature standards in Achieve’s 2004 end-of-high school benchmarks in English language arts: “H1. Demonstrate knowledge of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century foundational works of American literature” and “H2. Analyze foundational U.S. documents for their historical and literary significance (for example, The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, Abraham Lincoln’s ‘Gettysburg Address,’ Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’).” Both standards were reworded and added to Common Core’s grade-level standards for grades 9/10. Just before release of the final draft of Common Core’s ELA standards on June 2, 2010, these two standards were moved to grades 11/12.

11. The first author, at the request of Common Core’s staff, helped to draft this statement in the early stages of the project. He was approached specifically to strengthen the literary-historical aspect of the standards, and the staff welcomed the language of “foundational” and “classic” literature. Their request demonstrated Common Core’s interest in mandating certain materials, even against the wishes of educators and administrators who object to any required authors, texts, or traditions at all.

12. See, for example, David Coleman’s remarks in “Bringing the Common Core to Life” (April 28, 2011). <http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/docs/bringingthecommoncoretolife/part4transcript.pdf>. “That’s the first shift—50/50—informational text and literary text in K-5 required by the standards and required in both the standards and assessments that measure them. We were explicit about this...[the document] extends that same interest in the broad base of literacy...to 6th to 12th grade.”

Here, as in other remarks Coleman’s has made on the matter, it is hard to interpret his comments to mean anything other than a requirement for at least 50 percent informational reading in grades 6-12 in the English class, given ten standards for informational reading and nine standards for literary reading from K-12. Coleman never says that the vast bulk of the readings in the secondary English class should be literary, only that teachers of other subjects are also responsible for ensuring that 70 percent of the reading students do in high school is informational. He has been consistently coy about stating what percentage of that reading should take place in the English class.

13. See Chapter 5 in *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum* for examples of how the English class has been turned into an ersatz social studies class.

14. *The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum*.

15. “PARCC College-Ready Determination in ELA/Literacy and Mathematics.” <http://www.parcconline.org/crd-pld-survey>

16. <http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/assess/sbac.html>

17. <http://www.parcconline.org/samples/english-language-artsliteracy/grade-10-elaliteracy>



**Appendix A.**  
**No Research to Support a  
50/50 or 30/70 Division of  
Reading Standards**

Common Core makes repeated claims that its standards (presumably including the 50/50 division of literary and informational reading) are research-based. But we find no research cited in its own document to support its organizational framework for reading, nor any research cited in NAEP’s Reading Frameworks to support NAEP’s distribution of text types OR Common Core’s distribution of text types.

Common Core refers to NAEP’s decision to make test passages on its 12th-grade reading test 70 percent informational and 30 percent literary to guide the construction of tests based on Common Core’s standards. But how NAEP determined those proportions is cloudy. In an essay in the 54th *National Reading Conference Yearbook*, leading participants in the development of the 2009 reading framework provide only a few oblique sentences on the issue.<sup>1</sup> When it came to the distribution of test passages, they recalled, they had a discussion and made a recommendation—that’s all we hear:

Decisions about text categorization and ultimately about text selection for the assessment encouraged discussion about unique text characteristics, the kinds of thinking each engenders, and the extent of use in schools across grades 4, 8, and 12. Many committee members advocated for increasing amounts of diverse information texts in the upper grades, while others wanted a strong emphasis on the primacy of literature. The final recommendations for the distribution of text types in the NAEP Framework increase from an even balance at grade 4 to a 60-40 split favoring information text at grade 12. (p. 342)

No research is cited, no sources are given. Note, too, that the group recommended a 40/60 division, not a 30/70 one. When we asked Mary Crovo, Deputy Executive Director of NAEP, about the research behind the 30/70 decision, her reply was: “The percentages came from the work with Achieve, Inc. Their website may have more information” (email correspondence, July 30, 2012). That led us to Achieve’s 2005 report, “Recommendations to the National Assessment Governing Board on Aligning 12th Grade NAEP with College and Workplace Expectations—Reading.” In 2004, it explains, NAGB had asked Achieve to help NAEP in its redesign of 12th-grade assessments, and Achieve’s report on reading came out in February 2005. Orienting its approach specifically to preparedness for college, jobs, and the military, Achieve recommended revisions in the reading framework’s knowledge and skills measures. It started with “Recommendation 1”:

Because the reading demands that high school graduates face are overwhelmingly informational in nature and information literacy is a vital 21st century skill, NAEP should increase the percentage of informational text on the new NAEP from 60 to 70 percent. At the same time, it should retain the percentage dedicated to fiction under Literary Text [20%].

The reasons given for this increase, however, hardly count as evidence. In the following sentence, Achieve says that the rise “acknowledges the heavy presence of informational text in the reading and educational experience of high school students, the predominant reading demands in the college classroom, and addresses as well the ‘world-of-work’ imperative” of NAEP. A footnote in the next sentence identifies one source for that obvious assertion, an article by reading researcher Richard Venezky in a 2000 issue of *Scientific Studies of Reading*. The citation leads

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1. Terry Salinger, Michael Kamil, Barbara Kapinus, and Peter Afflerbach, “Development of a New Framework for the NAEP Reading Assessment,” in *National Reading Conference Yearbook*, vol. 54 (2005): 334-48.

nowhere, though. The article is a reprint of an essay by Venezky first published in 1982 in *Visible Language*, and the argument itself only asserts the same obvious point that most school and job reading individuals do is non-literary. More important, nowhere does Venezky support the assumption that informational reading in the school curriculum makes for better readers of informational texts in college than does literary reading in the school curriculum.

We strongly question this assumption. In the absence of empirical evidence for it, we find another line of thought more compelling. It goes like this. If we want students to read certain texts fluently and with full comprehension, we should have them study texts that are more complex than others. If we want them to comprehend a landlord/tenant agreement, we don't have them study landlord/tenant agreements. We have them study texts that involve higher levels of complexity as outlined in ACT's 2006 report titled "Reading Between the Lines." Comprehension relies not just on familiarity with a genre. It also relies on the vocabulary a reader knows, an ability to handle periodic sentences and figurative language and irony, an ability to discern author intent and shifting perspectives, etc. In other words, reading any genre requires general skills which are cultivated by engaging with the fullest resources of language and expression.

Of course, literary expression fulfills that pedagogical need, as the literariness of ACT's complex-text list demonstrates. We do not insist upon the point as an axiom, however, but only call for more respect for the value of literary reading for college and workplace unless research proves otherwise. Until then, we may assume that studying Alexander Pope's poetry may be more effective in developing comprehension of informational texts than is studying informational text themselves.

There is another problem with basing test passage proportions on the relative amounts of reading people do in different genres after

high school graduation. The assumption is that a test of reading should reflect the kinds of reading students do later on. But NAEP is a test of reading in general, as will be the PARCC assessment. They don't break reading down into informational reading ability, fiction reading ability, poetry reading ability, and literary non-fiction ability. They want to determine a more general capacity. Why, then, use actual reading-genre proportions to determine that capacity? Certainly, different genres do not exercise the same kinds and degrees of talent, and it is those relative differences that should determine test passage selection and reading curriculum, not the types of reading people actually do. Texts that require fuller exertions of literacy should receive more attention.

Consider an analogy with strength testing. People apply their strengths in many ways, but doctors don't evaluate patients' strength by estimating all those behaviors and design tests accordingly. They identify the more revealing tests of strength and focus on them.

We urge that the future-reading yardstick be dropped and that research be conducted on which assignments produce the best outcomes. To put it bluntly, we need evidence to determine whether blogs and media stories or 19th-century verse yield better readers of complex informational texts.

## **Appendix B.**

### **Common Core’s “College Readiness” Reading Standards.**

Common Core’s ten College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading are in Figure 1. As readers can easily see, they are devoid of literary and cultural content. They are generic reading skills, not academic standards. They can be applied to *The Three Little Pigs* as well as to *Moby-Dick*, or to *The Hunger Games* as well as to *Federalist 10*.

#### **Figure 1. The Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading**

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Readers may recognize the emptiness of those standards by contrasting them with a set of authentic academic standards. Figure 2 shows a grade-by-grade progression in the 2001 Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework. This particular progression addresses a broad standard titled “Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature.” As readers can see, these grade-level standards specify genre, formal and substantive content, and cultural/literary tradition.

#### **Figure 2. Massachusetts 2001 Grade-Level Standards for Myth, Traditional Narrative, and Classical Literature**

- Grades 5/6: Compare traditional literature from different cultures.
- Grades 5/6: Identify common structures (magic helper, rule of three, transformation) and stylistic elements (hyperbole, refrain, simile) in traditional literature.
- Grades 7/8: Identify conventions in epic tales (extended simile, the quest, the hero’s tasks, special weapons or clothing, helpers).
- Grades 7/8: Identify and analyze similarities and differences in mythologies from different cultures (ideas of the afterlife, roles and characteristics of deities, types and purposes of myths).
- Grades 9/10: Analyze the characters, structure, and themes of classical Greek drama and epic poetry.

Grades 11/12: Analyze the influence of mythic, traditional, or classical literature on later literature and film.

The explicit mention of traditional literature, epic tales, and classical Greek drama and epic poetry guarantees that English classes will have culturally significant readings on their syllabi by grade 10. Students will acquire cultural knowledge that will serve them well at the college level, for college coursework assumes that students have background knowledge in precisely these areas.

Such standards guide development of a coherent and progressively demanding literature/reading curriculum in K-12, preparing students adequately for a high school diploma, not to mention college coursework. Common Core's generic skills and strategies cannot by themselves propel the acquisition of knowledge necessary for genuine intellectual development, nor can they serve as an intellectual framework for a progressive and rigorous K-12 curriculum.

Below are other critical comments that correspond to our own criticisms of Common Core's literature standards. We quote from the evaluation of a Fordham Institute reviewer.<sup>1</sup>

...They would be more helpful to teachers if they attended as systematically to content as they do to skills, especially in the area of reading...

...The reading standards for both literature and informational text fail to address the specific text types, genres, and sub-genres in a systematic intersection with the skills they target. As written, the standards often address skills as they might apply to a number of genres and sub-genres. As a result, some essential content goes missing.

The...standards for grades 6-12 exhibit only minor distinctions across the grades, such as

citing evidence "to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences from the text." Several problems surface here. First, these standards don't properly scaffold skills from grade to grade. For example, quoting from text is arguably easier than paraphrasing, but the standards require mastery of paraphrasing first. Second, these standards are also repeated verbatim in the informational text strand, thus making no distinction between applying this skill to literary and informational text.

What's more, while some genres are mentioned occasionally in the standards, others, such as speeches, essays, and many forms of poetry, are rarely if ever mentioned by name. Similarly, many sub-genres, such as satires or epic poems, are never addressed. ... Many defining characteristics of the various genres are also rarely, if ever, mentioned... Where literary elements are mentioned, their treatment is spotty. ...

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1. Sheila Byrd Carmichael, W. Stephen Wilson, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and Gabrielle Martino. (July 21, 2010). *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.



## Appendix C. How to Preserve the Literary- Historical Orientation of the English Curriculum

To align with Common Core’s literary-historical requirements, schools must offer courses that assign historically significant works of literature across at least two centuries and organize them into identifiable traditions. We take the relevant standards in order and outline courses or modules necessitated by them.

First, a literary reading standard from grade 9-10:

RL.9-10.6. Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

The phrase “wide reading of world literature” sets a high standard for world literature. So does the opening of the statement from the “Key Ideas” section:

The standards mandate certain critical types of content for all students, including classic myths and stories from around the world, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature, and the writings of Shakespeare.

In order to meet it, schools need to craft a year-long syllabus of world literature that applies Common Core’s selection criteria. These include “classic” status, “exceptional craft and thought,” “profound insights,” and historical breadth. Selections must represent “classic myths and stories,” date from distant times, and impart a significant “point of view or cultural experience.” Because “world literature” is so broad a category, schools will have to apply another criterion so that the works assigned better cohere, for instance, a genre such as the epic (*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*) or tragedy (ancient Greek and Roman to 20th-century European). Many of those works may be found in recognized anthologies of world literature offered

by publishers Norton, Longman, Bedford, and McGraw-Hill.

The next standard lays a heavy burden of American literary history upon teachers.

RL.11-12.9. Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

The only way to meet this standard is through a full year of study that begins in the Colonial Period and ends with Modernism. There isn’t time to include contemporary literature, and informational texts must come mainly from the literary tradition (e.g., Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Thoreau’s *Walden*). As with world literature, several publishers have anthologies of American literature that provide more than enough breadth for the standard, both literary and informational. For more informational texts, we recommend anthologies of great American speeches such as the two-volume Library of American edition, as well as memoirs and autobiographies not included in the literary anthologies such as those by Ulysses S. Grant, Andrew Carnegie, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Three other standards mention Shakespeare.

RL.9-10.9. Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

RL.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.7. Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

We extend the requirements in these three standards to a full year of British literature, a course that should include one comedy, one tragedy, and one history play by Shakespeare. Readings should begin with short examples from Middle English (Chaucer’s “General Prologue,” *Everyman*), then proceed with abundant selections from each major era: Elizabethan, 17th Century, Restoration and 18th Century, Romantic and 19th Century, and Modern. The same publishers have anthologies sufficient to the purpose, including abundant informational offerings (e.g., literary essays, letters, memoirs).

We do not prescribe which works should be read in each course—any Shakespeare will do—but we do require a corpus that amounts to a significant and weighty tradition for each one. Literary history demands that certain authors be studied. A course in American literature that doesn’t include Hawthorne, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Twain, and Wharton doesn’t qualify, while a course in British literature that overlooks Milton, Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Austen, and Wilde doesn’t either. Appendix A in the Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Frameworks, “Suggested Authors, Illustrators, and Works Reflecting Our Common Literary and Cultural Heritage,” is a useful resource.

We know that numerous objections have been made to the content of these three courses as part of the Canon Wars in the past four decades. We respond to the major objections one by one.

*First*, “the reading list is not diverse enough.”

Our answer is, first, that many authors in American and British literature after 1800 are women and persons of color. More important,

to keep minority students from being exposed to literary traditions preceding 1800 because they are dominated by white male authors denies them a full education in the English language. All students in this country deserve to become familiar with Shakespeare, Swift, and other pre-1800 writers.

*Second*, “these courses do not introduce students to contemporary realities or the media.”

Given the time constraints of the high school schedule, the choice of materials for the English classroom may be understood as a question of relative benefits. Teachers can’t teach everything about culture, so they must select those materials that will be most formative for their students. They also have to remain within their expertise. ACT’s research, too, shows that studies in the major literary traditions in the English language are more supportive of college readiness than media literacy and topical matters. Such topics belong in a class on contemporary social issues in the senior year, not in the English class from grades 6-12.

*Third*, “the outline disallows teacher discretion.”

English teachers have far more latitude to follow their preferences than teachers in any other subject. To address the requirement of 18th-century texts, for example, they can survey Addison, Swift, Pope, Gay, Collins, Gray, Johnson, Boswell, Sheridan, and others for works that appeal to them. If a teacher fills class time with Ken Kesey instead of Emerson, the course has lowered both the historical value and verbal complexity of the readings. In addition, the teacher has not maintained the standard of “importance” highlighted by Common Core. The established writers of World, British, and American literary tradition take precedence over teachers’ tastes.

*Finally*, “who is to say what every student should read in an English class?”

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One hears this objection often, as if mandating certain readings were an arbitrary and authoritarian action. In order to pose that question sincerely, however, one must do two things beforehand, both of them a denial of actual conditions. First, one must discount the knowledge and experience of people involved in English curricula. This includes editors of anthologies, state and local curriculum superintendents, ELA standards developers, and, of course, English professors and teachers. They have years of advanced training, and they implement it and make reading choices all the time. They create tables of contents, course syllabi, and professional materials that include some works and not others. The “Who’s to say?” question could apply to them every day of their working lives, but if they entertained it, they would become paralyzed.

From the perspective of practical individual labor, then, we regard this question as a specimen of bad faith. It expresses a resistance that individuals do not and cannot obey in their own practice. The other denial bears upon the historical record, which elevates certain authors and works to essential status in an English literature class. The dictate comes not from educators today, but from writers, readers, artists, educators, and thinkers over the centuries. The monumental status of *Paradise Lost* is not a judgment made by standards committees at the current time. It is a historical fact. Since its first publication in 1667, the work has inspired, intrigued, and influenced countless readers, including some of the greatest writers of the last three centuries. To assert “We have no basis for requiring *Paradise Lost*” is to renounce the opinion of Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Emerson, Carlyle, Melville, T. S. Eliot, . . . One can turn the question back upon the questioner: “Who are you, a standards committee member in 2012, to dismiss the verdict of the foremost poets of the ages?” It takes a fair degree of confidence to ignore the record—call it the arrogance of the present—and it marks an anti-historical and anti-intellectual attitude.

It is also, we believe, an anti-English position.

All the other disciplines have a more or less agreed upon object of study, a subject matter that orients each discipline, distinguishing it from others and establishing its claim for space in the curriculum. Chemistry thrives because it imparts knowledge of chemistry. For decades, English thrived because it imparted knowledge of English literature. It taught other things, yes—rhetoric, composition—but Shakespeare, Swift, Emily Dickinson, and others stood right alongside them.

Literary tradition enjoyed status equal to biological knowledge, historical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, and civics knowledge. It was an independent body of material worthy of a full-scale discipline’s attention. A curriculum without a literary corpus didn’t count as liberal education. Indeed, for critics and intellectuals in the 20th century, American literary tradition formed a distinct heritage just as important as the history of the U.S. presidency, the course of modern science, the rise of industrialism, and other currents in American life.

One could not claim to be an educated American, much less an informed commentator, unless one had read widely in the American Novel. Novelists and poets themselves were understood as serious observers/interpreters/reflectors of the American scene. To scholars, poets, and critics such as V. A. Parrington, Malcolm Cowley, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, William Carlos Williams, and many others, not to require high points of American literature would not only hurt the discipline of English. It would deplete America. In asserting that method matters more than content, as the NCTE volume does, in turning too much of English over to skills, not knowledge, in justifying any text as long as the right scaffolding and exercises are attached to it, the discipline itself loses its integrity, and the cultural patrimony that is every citizen’s birthright is lost.

There is one more consideration in favor of these three courses, the most decisive of all: Common Core itself. For states in which Common Core is the rule from now on, arguments about readings

and choice don't matter. Without the World and American literature courses outlined above, English curricula cannot align with Common Core's ELA standards. These courses are mandated by them. The standard on "foundational texts of American literature" commands that the American patrimony be maintained. Once states adopt Common Core, they commit themselves to this curriculum whether they like it or not. They may not have realized that before, but what we have presented is what alignment with Common Core's standards means.



## Appendix D. Some of the States with Better Literature Standards than Common Core

The comments below come from a 2010 review of all states’ English language arts standards.<sup>1</sup>

**\*California:**<sup>2</sup> “California’s standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards. The essential content is grouped more logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands. In addition, the California standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. California’s standards for logic, writing applications, and oral presentations are also more detailed than those of the Common Core.”

**\*Colorado:**<sup>3</sup> “Colorado’s standards for literary and non-literary text analysis are more thorough and detailed than the Common Core, addressing specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both literary and non-literary texts. In addition, Colorado includes a strand devoted to “research and reasoning” which, despite occasional overreaching, outlines more detailed and rigorous expectations for logic. Colorado’s standards for oral presentations are also clearer and more detailed than those presented in the Common Core.”

**\*District of Columbia:**<sup>4</sup> “The District of Columbia’s standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards. The essential content is grouped more

logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands. In addition, the D.C. standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. Both D.C. and the Common Core include reading lists with exemplar texts, but D.C.’s is much more comprehensive. In addition, while the Common Core addresses American literature only in high school, the D.C. standards include this important content in elementary and middle school, too.”

**\*Indiana:**<sup>5</sup> “Indiana’s ELA standards are clear, specific, and rigorous, and include nearly all of the critical content expected in a demanding, college-prep curriculum.” On Clarity and Specificity: “Indiana’s standards are exceptionally clear and detailed. Many grade-specific standards include helpful examples that clarify purpose and intent.” On Content and Rigor: “The Indiana standards are outstanding with respect to content and rigor. The expectations for grammar, spelling, mechanics, and usage are clear and rigorous.”

“In addition to providing helpful lists of exemplar texts, the standards make numerous references to outstanding works of literature. What’s more, these are almost always related to a particular grade-specific expectation, and often in the context of an interesting question or idea.” ...”Similar examples provided throughout are not only vivid but inspiring. They set high expectations and outline rigorous works of literature to be read across grade levels.”

“Indiana’s standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core

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1. Sheila Byrd Carmichael, W. Stephen Wilson, Kathleen Porter-Magee, and Gabrielle Martino. (July 21, 2010). *The State of State Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

2. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/California.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/California.pdf)

3. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/Colorado.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Colorado.pdf)

4. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/DistrictofColumbia.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/DistrictofColumbia.pdf)

5. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/Indiana.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Indiana.pdf)

standards. Essential content is grouped more logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands.”

“Indiana also frequently uses standard-specific examples to clarify expectations. Furthermore, Indiana’s standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail throughout the document, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. Both Indiana and Common Core include reading lists with exemplar texts, but Indiana’s is much more comprehensive.”

**\*Louisiana:**<sup>6</sup> “While they suffer from wordiness and vague language in places, the Louisiana standards are strong in both content and rigor, exhibiting a clear progression from grade to grade. Literary text is also handled comprehensively and rigorously across the grades, with such welcome concrete additions as this:

Identify and explain connections between historical contexts and works of various authors, including Homer, Sophocles, and Shakespeare (grade 9)

The Louisiana standards also attempt to include American literature, as in these standard 6 expectations for grades 11-12:

Analyze and critique the impact of historical periods, diverse ethnic groups, and major influences (e.g., philosophical, political, religious, ethical, social) on American, British, or world literature in oral and written responses (grades 11-12)

Analyze and explain the significance of literary forms, techniques, characteristics, and recurrent themes of major literary periods in ancient,

American, British, or world literature (grades 11-12)

Analyze in oral and written responses the ways in which works of ancient, American, British, or world literature represent views or comments on life, for example:

- an autobiography/diary gives insight into a particular time and place
- the pastoral idealizes life in the country
- the parody mocks people and institutions
- an allegory uses fictional figures to express truths about human experiences (grades 11-12)

Louisiana’s standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in more systematic detail than the Common Core, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. Louisiana also more clearly prioritizes grade-appropriate genres in its writing standards and provides more detailed expectations for oral presentations.”

**From Sandra Stotsky’s Review for the Fordham Institute:**<sup>7</sup>

“This review covers Louisiana’s 2004 content standards and its 2004 grade level expectations. Its standards and expectations are strong in all areas, and its standards for literature are among the very best in the country. Its standards and expectations are clear, specific, measurable, and comprehensive. The grade level expectations provide strong objectives for beginning reading instruction and require explicit study of American literature in the high school grades with respect to literary periods, various ethnic groups, and recurrent themes. According to the LEAP Test Design, literary passages are more prevalent (and thus

6. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/Louisiana.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Louisiana.pdf)

7. Sandra Stotsky. *The state of state standards 2005*. (2005). Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

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weighted more) than other kinds of passages at the secondary school level.

The grade-level expectations contain an outstanding strand for literary devices showing the hand of well-trained English teachers in crafting these expectations. They also contain literary specifics at the high school level to outline the substantive content of the high school English curriculum.

In grade 9, students are, among other things, to “identify and explain connections between historical contexts and works of various authors, including Homer, Sophocles, and Shakespeare” and “analyze in oral and written responses distinctive elements (including theme, structure, and characterization) of a variety of literary forms and types, including: essays by early and modern writers; epic poetry such as *The Odyssey*; forms of lyric and narrative poetry such as ballads and sonnets; drama, including ancient, Renaissance, and modern; short stories and novels; and biographies and autobiographies.”

In grade 10, students are, among other things, to “analyze, in oral and written responses, distinctive elements, including theme and structure, of literary forms and types, including: essays by early and modern writers; lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetry; drama, including ancient, Renaissance, and modern; short stories, novellas, and novels; biographies and autobiographies; speeches.” They are also to “analyze connections between historical contexts and the works of authors, including Sophocles and Shakespeare.”

In grades 11 and 12, students are, among other things, to “demonstrate understanding...in American, British, and world literature...for example: ...comparing and contrasting major periods, themes, styles, and trends within and across texts” and “analyze and explain the

significance of literary forms, techniques, characteristics, and recurrent themes of major literary periods in ancient, American, British, or world literature.”

States with impoverished literature standards might profitably examine Louisiana's new grade-level expectations. Louisiana might strengthen its own grade-level expectations by providing selective lists of literary and non-literary works for teachers to draw upon.”

**\*Massachusetts:**<sup>8</sup> “Massachusetts's existing standards are clearer, more thorough, and easier to read than the Common Core standards. Essential content is grouped more logically, so that standards addressing inextricably linked characteristics, such as themes in literary texts, can be found together rather than spread across strands. In addition, Massachusetts frequently uses standard-specific examples to clarify expectations. Unlike the Common Core, Massachusetts's standards treat both literary and non-literary texts in systematic detail throughout the document, addressing the specific genres, sub-genres, and characteristics of both text types. While both sets of standards address American literature and append lists of exemplar texts, Massachusetts's reading list is far more comprehensive. Standards addressing vocabulary development and grammar are also more detailed and rigorous in the Massachusetts document.”

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8. [http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007\\_state\\_education\\_standards\\_common\\_standards/Massachusetts.pdf](http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Massachusetts.pdf)

## **Appendix E. Excerpts from British Columbia High School Exit Exams<sup>1</sup>**

### **Part A: Literary Selections**

1. In *Beowulf*, which Anglo-Saxon value is represented by Herot?

- A. power
- B. heroism
- C. boasting
- D. community

2. In “The Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales*, how is the Parson described?

- A. “a very festive fellow”
- B. “a fat and personable priest”
- C. “rich in holy thought and work”
- D. “an easy man in penance-giving”

3. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”), why does the speaker state that his mistress “treads on the ground”?

- A. She is a sensible woman.
- B. She is beautiful and attainable.
- C. He is praising her as a real woman.
- D. He is disappointed by her plainness.

4. Which quotation contains personification?

- A. “*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar’s I am”
- B. “No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move”
- C. “Nor what the potent Victor in his rage / Can else inflict”
- D. “and wanton fields / To wayward Winter reckoning yields”

5. In “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” on what does “dull sublunary” love depend?

- A. spiritual union
- B. physical presence
- C. common attitudes
- D. shared experience

6. In “On His Blindness,” which metaphor does Milton use to represent his literary powers?

- A. a talent
- B. a yoke
- C. a kingly state
- D. the dark world

7. In *The Rape of the Lock*, when Pope writes “So ladies in romance assist their knight, / Present the spear, and arm him for the fight,” what has just happened?

- A. Belinda has just pulled out a “deadly bodkin.”
- B. Chloe and Sir Plume have just confronted each other.
- C. Clarissa has just offered a “two-edged weapon” to the Baron.
- D. The Baron’s queen of spades defeats Belinda’s king of clubs.

### **Part B: Recognition of Authors and Titles**

17. “For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings”

- A. Wyatt
- B. Donne
- C. Chaucer
- D. Shakespeare

18. “And through the drifts the snowy clifts  
Did send a dismal sheen:  
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken —  
The ice was all between”

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1. Common Core. (2009). *Why We’re Behind: What Top Nations Teach Their Students But We Don’t*. A report by Common Core. Washington, DC. Pp. 25-33.



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- A. “Ulysses”
- B. “The Hollow Men”
- C. “Disembarking at Quebec”
- D. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

19. “Dim, through the misty green panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning”

- A. “Dover Beach”
- B. “Ode to the West Wind”
- C. “*Dulce et Decorum Est*”
- D. “Apostrophe to the Ocean”

20. “So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!”

- A. Keats
- B. Shelley
- C. Browning
- D. Wordsworth

### Part C: Shakespearean Drama

#### 1 written-response question

**Value: 20% Suggested Time: 25 minutes**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Choose **one** of the three passages on pages 14 to 17 in the **Examination Booklet**.

With specific reference to the drama, respond to one of the following statements in at least **200 words** in paragraph form. Write your answer in **ink** in the **Response Booklet**.

**Hamlet** (See passage on page 14.)

2. Show the significance of this exchange between Hamlet and Gertrude.

Refer both to this passage and to elsewhere in the play.

OR

**The Tempest** (See passage on page 15.)

3. With reference both to this passage and to elsewhere in the play, show that this passage contributes to theme.

OR

**King Lear** (See passage on page 17.)

4. Discuss the parallels between the father–child relationship found both in these passages and elsewhere in the play.

### Part D: General Essay

#### 1 written-response question

**Value: 30% Suggested Time: 40 minutes**

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Choose **one** of the following topics. Write a multi-paragraph essay (at least three paragraphs) of approximately **400 words**. Develop a **concise, focused** answer to show your knowledge and understanding of the topic. Include specific references to the works you discuss. You may not need all the space provided for your answer.

You must refer to at least **one** work from the Specified Readings List (see page 20 in the Examination Booklet). The only translated works you may use are those from Anglo-Saxon and Medieval English. Write your answer in **ink** in the **Response Booklet**.

**Topic 5** The presence or absence of loyalty is often a theme in literature.

Support this statement with reference to at least **three** literary works.

OR

**Topic 6** A journey of some kind is important to many works of literature.

Support this statement with reference to at least **three** literary works.

OR

**Topic 7** The meaning of a literary work may be enhanced by its reference to another work of art or literature.

Support this statement with reference to at least **three** literary works.

## **Specified Readings List**

### **Anglo-Saxon and Medieval**

- from *Beowulf*
- Geoffrey Chaucer, from *The Canterbury Tales*, “The Prologue”
- “Bonny Barbara Allan”
- from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

### **Renaissance and 17th Century**

- Sir Thomas Wyatt, “Whoso List to Hunt”
- Christopher Marlowe, “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love”
- Sir Walter Raleigh, “The Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd”
- William Shakespeare, Sonnet 29 (“When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes”) Sonnet 116 (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds”) Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”) *Hamlet, King Lear or The Tempest*
- John Donne, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”; “Death, Be Not Proud”
- Robert Herrick, “To the Virgins”
- John Milton, “On His Blindness”; from *Paradise Lost*
- from *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*

### **18th Century and Romantic**

- Lady Mary Chudleigh, “To the Ladies”
- Alexander Pope, from *The Rape of the Lock*
- Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal”
- Robert Burns, “To a Mouse”
- William Blake, “The Tiger”; “The Lamb”
- Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”
- William Wordsworth, “My Heart Leaps Up”; “The World Is Too Much with Us”

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”
- George Gordon, Lord Byron, “Apostrophe to the Ocean”
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind”
- John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”; “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be”

### **Victorian and 20th Century**

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses”
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnet 43 (“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways”)
- Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess”
- Emily Brontë, “Song”
- Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach”
- Thomas Hardy, “The Darkling Thrush”
- Emily Dickinson, “Because I Could Not Stop for Death”
- Wilfred Owen, “*Dulce et Decorum Est*”
- William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”
- T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”
- Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”
- Stevie Smith, “Pretty”
- Margaret Atwood, “Disembarking at Quebec”





