



# The Right Tool for the Job:

Improving Reading and Writing in the Classroom



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# INTRODUCTION

## FINDING THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB: IMPROVING READING AND WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

By Victoria McDougald

Many years after the adoption of new academic standards in most states, frustrated teachers and administrators across the country still decry the dearth of Common Core-aligned curricular materials. One [survey](#) conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) in 2014 found that 90 percent of surveyed districts reported having major or minor problems finding such resources.<sup>1</sup> More recent studies conducted by [Morgan Polikoff](#) and [Bill Schmidt](#) also conclude that the majority of textbooks marketed as being aligned with Common Core actually have “substantial alignment problems.”<sup>2</sup>

In response to this persistent lack of high-quality, standards-aligned materials, organizations such as [EdReports](#) and agencies like the [Louisiana Department of Education](#) have begun providing educators with free, independent reviews of curricular resources.<sup>3</sup> Other groups have developed rubrics and evaluation tools intended to help state, district, and school leaders vet the quality and alignment of textbooks, units, and lesson plans (including [EQuIP](#), [IMET](#), and [Student Achievement Partners’ “Publishers’ Criteria”](#)).<sup>4</sup> Even Amazon has entered the curricular stage, recently announcing the launch of a [new platform for educators](#) that will feature free curricular resources and teacher ratings and reviews.<sup>5</sup>

To date, however, very little information exists on the quality and content of digital learning tools intended to supplement a full curriculum. And what does exist isn’t as user-friendly as it could be for teachers and students. One site, [EdSurge](#), aims to provide educators with information on digital curricula and tools for teaching and learning.<sup>6</sup> The site includes hundreds of overviews of various resources (including basic pricing and usage information), which are accompanied by individual educator ratings and feedback on each tool. While the voluminous site includes resources for a wide range of subjects—from language arts to social studies and even engineering—the program and product overviews themselves are fairly brief, and it’s difficult to sort through the (sometimes hundreds of!) educator reflections on each tool. [LearningList](#) is a similar site that provides brief reviews of publishers’ instructional materials (both comprehensive and supplemental), including standards alignment.<sup>7</sup>

We thought we might be able to do a little better, at least in terms of providing in-depth reviews of several promising digital tools. To this end, we recruited a team of all-star educators to evaluate the quality and usefulness of nine K–12 English language arts (ELA)/literacy instructional tools: Achieve the Core’s “[Text Sets](#),” [Curriculet](#), [iCivics Drafting Board](#), [Lexia Reading Core5](#), [Newsela](#), [Quill](#), [ReadWorks](#), [ThinkCERCA](#), and [WriteLike](#).<sup>8</sup> We focused on ELA

resources as educators stress that those are especially difficult to come by, particularly when it comes to writing tools.

When choosing the tools, we intentionally included a range of reading, writing, and content-building resources recommended to us by practitioners and other curriculum experts. Most are free or low-cost, and while some resources (such as Newsela) are already in high demand, we also aimed to highlight newer and lesser-known resources for the field. Finally, we intentionally included several interactive, student-facing tools, as these remain relatively rare in the ELA curricular landscape (which tends to comprise tools designed mostly for use by teachers rather than by students). Collectively, the digital tools we reviewed focus on reading and/or writing instruction across all grade levels (K-12).

For each resource, reviewers assessed the following:

What is the tool or product designed to do?

- Is it intended to be aligned to college- and career-ready standards (including Common Core)?
- Does it include student assessments or data reporting for teachers?
- How is it *intended* to be used, and how might the resource be better used by educators?
- Is it organized logically and easy for teachers (and/or students) to use?
- Does the tool include beneficial suggestions for how it might be integrated into a larger curriculum?
- What are the tool's overall strengths and weaknesses?

For reading, we also evaluated whether the tools include high-quality texts that are grade-appropriate and sequenced to build content knowledge and vocabulary, and whether they include a balance of text types and text-dependent questions and tasks (as called for by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)).

For writing, we assessed whether the tools include instruction on specific writing skills and a balance of writing text types, as called for by CCSS.

The reviews were conducted by four top-notch, experienced educators in the summer and fall of 2016:

- Melody Arabo is a third-grade teacher in Michigan, a National Education Association (NEA) Master Teacher, a Michigan Educator Voice Fellow, the 2015 Michigan Teacher of the Year, and a 2016 Teaching Ambassador Fellow for the U.S. Department of Education.
- Jonathan Budd is a K-12 director of curriculum, instruction, and assessments in Connecticut with nineteen years of prior teaching experience. His particular expertise is literacy, with a focus on text complexity.

- Shannon Garrison is a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in California with two decades of teaching experience. She holds a National Board Certification and serves on the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).
- Tabitha Pacheco is a ten-year teaching veteran who holds a National Board Certification. She is a 2015 National Teaching Fellow for the Hope Street Group and serves on the Practitioners Advisory Group for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.

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Six years into Common Core implementation, procuring CCSS-aligned instructional materials continues to be a time-consuming challenge for many educators. This report provides ELA teachers with information on nine particularly promising low- or no-cost reading and writing tools that are currently accessible online, and highlights important strengths and weaknesses for each.

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# READING TOOLS (TEXT SETS)



# NEWSELA

## PART ONE: WHY ARE 6.1 MILLION STUDENTS USING NEWSELA?

By Shannon Garrison

With the transition to the Common Core, one of the biggest challenges teachers face is finding high-quality, relevant, nonfiction texts. Many of the traditional reading programs do not have the balance of fiction and nonfiction for which the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) call, and as a result, a lot of teachers struggle to find the resources they need to effectively prepare students.

As a teacher, I have spent countless hours trying to find appropriate nonfiction texts that I can use with a classroom of diverse learners. I have struggled to find engaging articles that could be read by my English-language learners and still challenge those students who are reading above grade level. Thankfully, last year, I found [Newsela](#).<sup>9</sup>

### Newsela Overview

Newsela is an education website focused on building student reading comprehension by providing high-quality news articles and real-time assessments for students in grades 2–12. The site offers both a free version and a more extensive paid version called Newsela PRO (see *Newsela PRO* sidebar, page 9). As many educators and schools are working with limited budgets, this overview focuses on the free version, but it also discusses Newsela PRO briefly. (Due to concerns about mature subjects and the content of some news articles, Newsela has created [Newsela Elementary](#).<sup>10</sup> Its content and organization mirror the original Newsela site, but it contains only articles appropriate for elementary-aged students.)

The free site content includes current news articles, historical documents and texts, and student-assessment features, all detailed below.

The news articles span a wide array of content, including science, money, law, health, arts, sports, and opinion. The site provides high-quality nonfiction texts from well-regarded media sources, such as the *Washington Post*, *Scientific America*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Associated Press*. An added benefit of using the site is that students not only practice reading nonfiction but also stay current with what is happening locally and globally.

## Newsela PRO

Newsela's fee-based version, Newsela PRO, offers enhanced tools and experiences. Newsela does not publish prices on its website but shared in a recent tweet that the Pro version **costs** about \$6,000 per school, \$2,000 per grade level, and \$18 per student per year.<sup>11</sup> (Newsela has worked with DonorsChoose.org in the past, so that may be an option for teachers who wish to subscribe to Newsela PRO on their own. They can also request a free thirty-day trial to see whether Newsela PRO works well for their purposes).

The biggest benefit of the PRO version is that it allows teachers to go beyond classroom-level data to view individual student progress and to track student progress against the CCSS. It allows teachers to see individual quiz results and read, score, and provide feedback on student responses to the writing prompts. Teachers are also able to sort and filter student-performance data and print reports, enabling them to track data, identify trends, and adjust instruction accordingly.

The PRO version also has several added features. Teachers can edit writing prompts so that they align more closely with what they're doing in the classroom. This allows teachers to more easily link Newsela articles with topics they are discussing in class.

Newsela PRO also provides options for both students and teachers to annotate text—and allows them to view and respond to each other's annotations. Teachers can use this to call attention to specific points in the text, to prompt students to reflect about something said in the text, or to add more notes to aid with comprehension. For their part, students can respond to teacher questions, ask their own questions, or just type in thoughts and reflections. This definitely makes the reading more interactive and helps teachers to promote close reading.

Along with a library of articles, Newsela provides real-time assessments of student comprehension through multiple-choice quizzes and writing prompts. Each article is accompanied by a four-item quiz that probes the following areas: what the text says; central ideas; people, events, and ideas; word meaning and choice; text structure; point of view or purpose; multimedia; or arguments and claims. These categories are aligned to the first eight Common Core Anchor Standards for Reading, but they are also written generally enough to be aligned to reading-comprehension standards in states not using the CCSS. Teachers also have the option of assigning a short writing prompt related to the article the students read.

Students and teachers can also use Newsela's built-in "annotation tool" as they read. They can highlight passages in articles, mark them with symbols, ask questions, jot notes, and write short summaries of important ideas. This is a great way for students to purposely interact with text, to promote their active reading, and to further their comprehension.

Newsela is adaptive, with each article accessible at five reading (Lexile) levels. The original article is used as the highest Lexile level. It's then rewritten by Newsela staff for different grade levels, using a Lexile conversion chart available on their website. Teachers initially set the grade level for all students in their class; after a student has taken eight to ten quizzes, the site adjusts the articles to that student's appropriate reading level—a continuous process based on pupil performance. This adaptive feature allows for an entire class to read and discuss the same content, while permitting individual students to access material at their individual reading level. To make its content accessible to more students, Newsela has also translated many of its articles into Spanish—again available at five reading levels.

Though nonfiction news articles make up the bulk of Newsela’s resources, the site also has a “library” that includes primary-source documents, biographies, famous speeches, and historical “Time Machine” articles. Resources available in the library include fascinating documents such as Howard Carter’s diary written during the discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb; engaging articles, such as a 1900’s account of children working in the coal mines of Pennsylvania; and inspiring speeches, such as Cesar Chavez’s “Lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” Like the news articles, each document contains a multiple-choice quiz and a writing prompt to assess comprehension.

Along with its online library of news articles and historical documents, Newsela provides both students and teachers with “binders” where assignments and assessment-related information can be stored. Teachers are able to view classroom-level data, including the number of students who have completed an assignment and the class average on a quiz, but cannot review individual student data or writing responses unless they subscribe to Newsela PRO (see *Newsela PRO* sidebar, page 9). Assignments can be filtered by academic standard so that teachers can see how their class is performing on quizzes that address a specific standard. Students are able to view their assignments and individual assessment data in their binders.

The Newsela website can be accessed on a variety of digital platforms, and Newsela apps have been designed for both iPads and iPhones. The website is intuitively organized and easy to navigate.

Unsurprisingly, Newsela has proven popular with educators: as of July 2016, it had been used by over 6.1 million students and 800,000 teachers in all fifty states and internationally. Students have read nearly 100 million articles since Newsela was created.

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Although Newsela’s articles and resources are valuable instructional tools in their own right, the site also includes text sets: sets of news articles, biographies, speeches, and historical documents organized around a central theme or topic (for more on text sets and their use, see *What are “text sets,” and why use them in the classroom?* sidebar, page 11). For a closer look at Newsela’s text set capabilities and how they can be used in the classroom, see part two of this review below.

# NEWSELA

## PART TWO: USING THE NEWS TO BUILD KNOWLEDGE

By Shannon Garrison

Although the news articles and resource library on Newsela are in high demand with educators struggling to meet the Common Core's recommended balance of fiction and nonfiction texts, perhaps Newsela's most distinctive feature is its text sets: collections of articles that focus on a similar topic, theme, or standard.<sup>12</sup> This can be an effective way to build students' background knowledge and vocabulary, which are both linked to increased reading comprehension (for more on text sets and their use, see *What are "text sets," and why use them in the classroom?* sidebar).

### Newsela Text Sets

Newsela's free text sets consist of articles, primary documents, and biographies focused on a specific topic. The site includes featured text sets, text sets for specific subjects, and paired texts, among other resources. The site allows teachers to save text sets, edit them by either adding or deleting articles, and create their own text sets by selecting from Newsela's library of articles, biographies, speeches, and historical documents.

### What are "text sets," and why use them in the classroom?

Text sets are collections of texts tightly focused on a specific topic. They may include varied genres (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and so forth) and media (such as blogs, maps, photographs, art, primary-source documents, and audio recordings).

Text sets can be organized in many different ways. Although all high-quality text sets are designed to build knowledge of an academic topic, some are arranged as series of texts (and other media) that become progressively more advanced, while others have a central or "anchor" text with supplementary texts that support the themes and content of the central text. No matter the organization, effective text sets are usually presented in a specific order with attention to text complexity, vocabulary development, content knowledge, and conceptual understanding. *In other words*, "the focus of study becomes concepts rather than the content of one particular book. Students gain both a broad perspective and an in-depth sense of the subject matter from reading many texts on the same topic."<sup>13</sup>

Research has shown the use of conceptually coherent text sets to be effective in building knowledge and vocabulary, as well as preparing students for new texts on the same topic.<sup>14</sup> Both broad knowledge and topic-specific knowledge are essential for reading comprehension. In turn, background knowledge allows readers to make inferences, which *aids in comprehension, thinking, and memory*.<sup>15</sup> Studies have also shown that prior knowledge of a topic *has a greater impact* on reading comprehension than generalized reading ability.<sup>16</sup> As educators, we must recognize the power of prior knowledge!

One drawback is that it takes considerable time and effort to plan an effective text set. Teachers must consider text complexity, vocabulary, and content knowledge in the context of a specific set of students. Though there are many books and articles available that walk through the process of planning text sets, it is often difficult for teachers to find the time to engage in this process. Luckily, there are websites out there that can help.

Newsela, Readworks, and Achieve the Core all have online text set resources for educators. This report contains a review of each of these text set tools, its usability and organization, and overall strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers new to this instructional strategy can find a text set “toolkit” in Newsela’s learning and support center. The toolkit includes an introduction to Newsela’s text sets; lessons on creating and editing them; instructions on how to find, share, and customize them; and a video that reviews all aspects of the toolkit. The toolkit also includes lesson plans that give teachers ideas on how to use text sets in their classrooms.

Featured text sets—created by educators and Newsela staff—are ready made for use as is or can be customized to meet the needs of a specific class. For example, one designed for fourth grade, entitled *Math in the Real World*, focuses on the applications of math in daily life. It includes articles on how math is used in sports (“Baseball Players Pick up a Bat, Then a Pencil”), science (“Average Height in U.S. Stays the Same, While Others Grow Taller”), and even art (“An Art Mystery is Solved”).

Newsela has also created subject-specific text sets that are focused on science, literature, and social studies. Those for science include articles from different realms of science, technology, and engineering that are aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards’s core ideas. Literature text sets are focused on single novels and include articles on characters and themes related to the book. The social-studies text sets focus on history, civics, and geography but integrate articles from all categories of the Newsela Library.

Newsela has also developed “paired texts,” consisting of two articles related to a single topic or theme, followed by a writing prompt that requires students to use evidence from both sources. As the site notes, “These prompts align nicely with any Common Core–based rubrics that require students to cite and explain evidence in a written response.” For example, in a paired text on drones, one prompt asks, “Each article presents a different perspective on drones. Overall, do you think drones are more helpful or harmful to the world’s population? Use evidence from both articles to support your answer.”

A particularly helpful feature is that Newsela also provides tools for teachers to create their own text sets. This allows teachers to search for and create a set for a specific unit or series of lessons to complement their current instruction.

### How Can Teachers Use Newsela in Their Classrooms?

There are countless ways for teachers to use Newsela in the classroom.

News articles and text sets can provide students with background knowledge in preparation for classroom activities and discussions. For example, if a teacher is introducing the science concept of adaptation, she could create a text set of articles on the subject and assign them to students. It is easy and quick. Thoughtfully assembled text sets can provide students with real-world examples of adaptation while also exposing them to key vocabulary. This background knowledge helps students access the science content and better comprehend the concept of adaptation.

Newsela articles can supplement a novel or other literature by providing additional information on a subject or providing context on a historical period. For example, for students reading *I Am Malala*, teachers can use Newsela to provide background knowledge on Pakistan and current issues facing the country.

Newsela is also a good resource for integrating current events into the classroom. Whether teachers are focusing on the five w's (who, what, where, when, and why) of a news article or asking students to identify the main idea, students are learning about events happening in the world around them. Teachers could also ask students to select an article and explain it to the class, which would promote both reading comprehension and speaking skills.

Newsela can also be used to help students doing background research for projects or reports. As highlighted previously, one of the challenges that teachers face is finding nonfiction text written for students. When younger students are conducting research on a topic, they often have difficulties reading the information that they find. With Newsela, the articles are adapted to students' reading levels.

Newsela also provides articles that discuss both sides of controversial issues. Pro/con articles can be found on topics such as labeling genetically modified food, using nuclear power to combat global warming, and the use of self-driving cars. These provide students with background knowledge and can also be used as a basis for persuasive and opinion writing, discussions and debates, and for students to practice comparing and contrasting.

### **What are Newsela's Greatest Strengths?**

A particular strength of Newsela is its selection of high-quality nonfiction texts and text sets for teachers and students. With the transition to the Common Core, finding quality nonfiction texts has been a real challenge for many educators. Newsela offers teachers and students nonfiction text sets designed around a topic, theme, or standard, which can build students' background knowledge and vocabulary to increase reading comprehension. It also provides news articles from trusted media sources, which helps students to remain current on local and global events.

Another strength is Newsela's adaptivity. Each article is available at five different reading levels, enabling students with varying reading abilities to access the same content. Finding relevant texts written at various reading levels is a huge challenge for teachers, so this is a big time saver. Newsela also continuously adjusts students' reading levels based on their performance on each assessment.

Newsela's assessments for each article include both multiple-choice items and writing prompts. Students receive immediate feedback on their multiple-choice assessments and can review questions that they missed. The assessments appear on the screen next to the article, allowing students to go back to the text to find evidence (an important skill emphasized in the Common Core). The writing prompts are also evidence based and promote higher-order thinking.

A further strength is Newsela's comprehensive learning and support center, which can be accessed by clicking on the question mark in the corner of the page. The site provides excellent professional development on a variety of topics using short articles, videos, and live webinars. Teachers can find quick-start guides, videos, and articles on everything from signing up students to scoring writing prompts.

Newsela generally provides an engaging, interactive experience for students, who can read online, interact with the text, assess their comprehension, and actively track their progress on quizzes. Students are also able to read any article on Newsela, which allows them to seek out articles of personal interest and expand their knowledge base.

### How Might Newsela Be Improved?

Although the free version of Newsela provides teachers and students with many great resources, it does not give teachers access to student-level data. This is a major drawback of the free version, as is the inability of teachers using the free version to see student responses to the writing prompts. Though these assessments are great resources, they are meaningless to teachers if they cannot access them to assess performance, growth, and student needs.

Newsela's text sets are generally excellent, but some revisions would make them even stronger. For example, there are general lesson plans and writing prompts available for a few text sets, but most lack such plans and suggested classroom activities. The text sets are also not presented in any particular order, so teachers must read each article and consider text complexity, vocabulary, and students' prior knowledge to determine the most suitable order themselves. This can be challenging and time consuming. In addition, the text sets are not accompanied by assessments. Each article has its own assessment, but there is no assessment requiring students to integrate knowledge from multiple sources, although that's an important requirement of the Common Core.

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Overall, Newsela is an excellent resource for classroom teachers. Its articles are interesting, gathered from trusted media sources, and presented at multiple levels of complexity so that students with varying reading skills can access the text. The site is easy to use, and (in my experience) students find it engaging. The articles also cover myriad topics, so no matter what subject you teach, you are apt to find something relevant to your class.

# READWORKS

## PART ONE: REPUTABLE READS FOR FREE

By Shannon Garrison

We know the importance of students developing strong reading comprehension skills. Students need to be able to read and understand a variety of complex texts in order to be successful – in school, in their careers, and in life.

As a teacher, I am always looking for new and better ways to engage my students in reading. One recent find worth sharing is [ReadWorks](#).<sup>17</sup> This site provides teachers with passages, paired texts, text sets, lessons, comprehension units, and novel study units, all at no charge to the user. The materials are research-based, come from reputable sources, and are classroom ready.

### ReadWorks Overview

ReadWorks is an education website that provides teachers with online, research-based units, lessons, and nonfiction and literary passages to help develop and strengthen student reading comprehension. As its website says, “ReadWorks is committed to solving the nation’s reading comprehension crisis by giving teachers the research-proven tools and support they need to improve the academic achievement of their students.”

The ReadWorks website offers more than 2,600 informational and literary passages for students in grades K-12 at no cost. About half of its passages were commissioned from professional journalists and writers, while others were obtained from partner institutions such as the National Audubon Society, History.com, and the American Museum of Natural History.

The passages are supported by an extensive research base, including studies by the National Reading Panel and the RAND Reading Study Group. The website also summarizes key research on topics such as comprehension skills, read-alouds, vocabulary instruction, developing background information, and instruction in text structure and syntax.

All passages on the website are searchable by keyword, grade, lexile level (a standard for matching readers with appropriate texts), topic, text type, and skill/strategy. The text passages are grouped under 12 topics, such as Civics & Government, Technology & Engineering, and World History, so teachers can easily find passages to fit whatever subject or topic they are teaching. Literary, informational, and poetry passages are all available. In addition, the skills/strategies are broken into 20 distinct categories, including Author’s Purpose, Cause/Effect, Drawing Conclusions, and Vocabulary in Context. This helps teachers find passages suited to the teaching of specific reading skills or to select passages that address multiple skills and strategies.



The majority of ReadWorks' reading passages are accompanied by a text-dependent question set, i.e. questions that require students to use evidence from the text to answer correctly. They aid in assessing student comprehension and typically contain five to ten multiple-choice and short answer items.

Additional resources accompanying some passages include a vocabulary resource with definitions, cognates (words with common etymology), and sample uses of the words. Also available are "StepReads," which are more accessible versions of the passage for struggling readers, as well as text pairs. (As of October 2016, ReadWorks has developed at least one StepReads passage for approximately 280 of its texts. About 40 texts have two StepReads passages, and this will continue to rise in the coming months.) Teachers can filter search results to locate passages that contain any of these specific resources. For example, a teacher can search for 8<sup>th</sup> grade life-science passages that contain both vocabulary and StepReads options.

ReadWorks does not specify the order in which teachers should present passages, but it does provide general recommendations, such as suggesting that early-grade teachers start with literary texts and focus first on passages that lend themselves to teaching character, setting, and plot. It also recommends—for both literary and informational texts—that educators begin by focusing on drawing conclusions, inferences, and how to understand vocabulary-in-context.

Resources on the site are said to be aligned to all state standards (including the Common Core), and to several widely used reading programs, including Macmillan McGraw-Hill *Treasures* and Houghton Mifflin-Harcourt *Journeys*. Teachers can use the "My Standards Alignment" tab to select their state or their reading program to show which ReadWorks lessons align with particular standards.

The ReadWorks website is clearly designed and user-friendly, providing teachers with an online "Binder" where they can save passages, lessons, and units that they may want to use or refer back to at a later date. The site can be accessed on a variety of digital platforms and works well on various browsers (Safari, Chrome, Firefox). It is also accessible via iPad.

As of August 2016, ReadWorks had over 2 million registered users.

### Resources on ReadWorks

In addition to the reading passages discussed above, ReadWorks provides three types of lesson plan resources: Skill & Strategy Lesson Units, Comprehension Units, and Novel Study Units.

The Skill & Strategy Lesson Units are designed for grades K-4 and focus on grade-level reading skills and/or strategies. They contain lesson plans, texts and materials, and offer standards alignment. (While most lesson materials are available on the ReadWorks site, lessons based on literature require teachers to acquire the book separately.)

Comprehension Units for grades K-5 are based on “carefully selected books that will build background knowledge and vocabulary” and are designed to “facilitate precise questioning and focused discussion based on evidence in the text.” Each unit has a scripted read-aloud lesson and a paired text with questions requiring students to integrate knowledge from both texts.

ReadWorks also offers novel study units for grades 5 and 6. As of February 2017, there were five such units at each grade level. Available, too, are paired passages and text sets to promote vocabulary development and background knowledge, both of which have been shown to strengthen reading comprehension.

Part two of this review delves deeper into these resources, including their greatest strengths and areas of improvement.

# READWORKS

## PART TWO: READING THAT WORKS: PAIRING PASSAGES AND SETS OF TEXTS?

By Shannon Garrison

While [ReadWorks](#) offers a huge array of reading comprehension resources for educators, two particularly promising features are its paired passages and text sets for grades K-12.<sup>18</sup> The former consist of two passages with similar topics and/or themes, while the text sets are comprised of three or more passages that share a topic or theme. Both resources can be used to build vocabulary and background knowledge in order to strengthen student reading comprehension and content knowledge.

### Paired Passages

ReadWorks provides teachers with paired passages to help build vocabulary and background knowledge around a specific topic. The reasoning behind each pairing is clearly stated and sets of questions that assess student learning and comprehension accompany each pair. Questions focus on each passage individually and then on the integration of knowledge from both passages.

For example, one 8<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History text pair includes the passages *Frederick Douglass: from Slavery to Freedom* and *Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow*. ReadWorks explains that “these texts have been paired because they both address the historical struggle for equal rights of African Americans.” Paired text question sets follow:

- Compare the impact that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige had on African Americans’ rights. Use evidence from both texts to support your comparison.
- Contrast the ways that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige helped to achieve positive changes for African Americans. Use evidence from both texts to support your answer.

Teachers can search for paired passages in the same way they search for individual passages – by keyword, grade, lexile level, topic, text type, and skill/strategy. They can also filter results to identify passages that contain vocabulary, questions, and/or a “StepReads” version of the original passage that is more manageable for struggling readers.

## Digital ReadWorks

ReadWorks recently released a new website that provides access to its passages and teacher resources using a digital platform. This allows teachers to find passages and then assign them to students, who can then read them and take assessments online. Passages are searchable by grade or lexile level, text type (informational text or literature), and product (articles, audio, paired texts, StepReads, and Article-a-Day).

Although it is a separate website, users will find many of the same features, passages, and lessons as are housed on the original ReadWorks website. Digital ReadWorks has also added features such as audio recordings and eBooks to support reading comprehension. Text sets, however, are unavailable on Digital ReadWorks.

Once students have read an assigned passage and submitted their assessment, the multiple-choice questions are auto scored. The constructed response items show up in the teacher's account under Assignments, so they can score them. Teachers can see individual student and class results for any given passage. This may help teachers identify students who need extra help, track data trends to see if specific skills need to be retaught, and determine their next steps in reading instruction. Students can also review assessment questions and track their individual results in their accounts.

While Digital ReadWorks is a terrific resource, teachers must assign reading passages to students. (Students cannot read passages on their own or self-select topics of interest.) It would be great to see a library of passages that are available for students to read if they so desire. Let's hope Digital ReadWorks also makes the text sets available, as these are a valuable resource for teachers.

## Text Sets

In addition to paired texts, ReadWorks has developed about 40 text sets for grades K-12. Each contains three or more passages and focuses on a shared topic, theme, or structure. Each "text set includes a learning goal, key vocabulary, and questions for each text." ReadWorks also supplies a text set learning goal with three additional questions that require the integration of knowledge from all passages.

Most of the text sets focus on nonfiction science and social studies topics and contain informational articles, biographies, essays, infographics, and speeches. They include authentic texts of varying structure, including articles from the New York Philharmonic, and excerpts from Ology – the American Museum of Natural History's website for kids.

Unfortunately, it is challenging to *find* the text sets. Because they do not have their own section on the website, you find them by chance when searching through the paired passages.

ReadWorks also offers Article-a-Day, which is a "10-15 minute daily routine where students choose and read one high-quality nonfiction article every day, as part of a weekly, topically-related article set." (These text sets are much easier to find as they have their own heading under Reading Passages.) While not necessarily on the exact same topic, the text sets appear to be thematically related (see weaknesses below). For example, one weekly article set entitled, "Health and Human Body" includes the articles: *How Do Scrapes Heal?*, *Be Careful with Medicines*, *Learning About Your World*, *About Your Bones*, *How Your Ears Work*, and *Music in Your Ears*. ReadWorks provides great guidance for teachers on how to implement this daily routine and provides resources and lesson plan ideas, too.

### How Can Teachers Use ReadWorks Passage Pairs and Text Sets in Their Classrooms?

No matter the grade level or subject area, ReadWorks is a fine supplement to one's reading curriculum, and there are many ways that it can be incorporated into a classroom.

Text pairs can be used to focus on a specific skill or strategy, such as vocabulary in context or drawing conclusions. Teachers can search by grade level and skill/strategy to find high-quality text pairs that can be used for classroom instruction, guided practice, or independent work. These passages can also be used for homework assignments so students can practice a specific skill or strategy on their own.

Paired passages can be used to focus on comparing and contrasting. They are also perfect for students to practice "analyzing how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take," as called for by Common Core.

The site's text pairs and text sets are a great way for teachers to supply background knowledge and vocabulary for students. These can be used prior to the start of a unit or to supplement instruction during the unit. For example, if a first grade teacher was planning an astronomy unit, he/she might include the ReadWorks text set that includes the articles, "Day to Night," "Does the Moon Really Shine?" and "Why Don't We See Stars in the Daytime?" All of these articles help to build background knowledge and vocabulary essential to understanding the first grade Earth and Space Science standards.

Finally, the "Article-a-Day" resources are 10-minute daily routines that use weekly text sets to build reading comprehension skills via four easy steps. First, the teacher sets the purpose for reading. This could include building vocabulary or simply gaining more knowledge of a topic. Next, the students read the passage independently. (Of course, kindergarten and first grade teachers can do a read aloud if necessary.) The third step is called "The Book of Knowledge" where students write or draw about one or two interesting things they learned from the passage. Finally, students can share what they learned with the class.

### What are the Greatest Strengths of the ReadWorks Text Pairs and Sets?

ReadWorks' greatest strength is that it provides teachers with quality, research-based literary and nonfiction passages, text pairs, and text sets – all at no cost. (see *What are "text sets," and why use them in the classroom?* sidebar on page 11 for why text sets are so valuable.) It is often a struggle for teachers to find quality passages to supplement their curriculum. ReadWorks offers a huge number - over 2,600 - informational and literary passages from trusted sources.

ReadWorks is also user friendly. Of the various text set resources available online, this website is particularly well-organized. In a matter of minutes, teachers can find relevant passages and text pairs (not sets; see below) for their classes.

The passage pairs and text sets can be used to address many of the Common Core standards, such as analyzing multiple texts to build knowledge.

Many of the paired passages on ReadWorks also have “StepReads,” which are slightly more accessible versions of the original passage. This provides teachers with a way to differentiate the reading passage while providing all students the same content. As of October 2016, ReadWorks has developed at least one StepReads passage for approximately 280 of its 2,600 texts.

### How Might ReadWorks Be Improved?

While ReadWorks’ text sets are a wonderful resource, finding them is a big challenge (in contrast to the text pairs, which are more easily accessible). For example, a ReadWorks staff member emailed me a list of the 40+ text sets, but I could not find a way to specifically search for them on the website. The site would be much improved if its text sets were a more conspicuous feature.

The text sets themselves could be made more valuable for teachers if they supplied guidance on text order and some ideas for classroom implementation. Teachers have such limited time that it’s exceptionally helpful to have resources that suggest appropriate text order based on text complexity, vocabulary, and content. Lesson plans and suggested activities would further strengthen the text sets.

While the Article-a-Day routine is a great way to get students reading, the weekly text sets suffer because many of the articles in them are loosely related by theme rather than closely focused on the same topic. To build vocabulary and background knowledge, text sets need to be tightly focused.

A further shortcoming: the questions for each passage are not included in the Article-a-Day section, so teachers must search for the individual article to access the questions. It would definitely be handier for teachers if everything could be accessed in one place.

Another weakness is the inconsistency of resources available for ReadWorks passages. ReadWorks offers some amazing resources for teachers, including question sets, vocabulary, StepReads, and text pairs, but there is no consistency with regards to which passages have these resources. For example, some passages have only question sets and vocabulary, while others are missing question sets. While ReadWorks is adding new content all the time, this could be very frustrating for teachers if they find a passage that they would like to use, but then have no question set or no StepReads version to use with their struggling readers.

A weakness of the Digital ReadWorks site, as noted earlier, is its lack of text sets. While all other passages and text pairs are available on the new platform, text sets were left off (see *Digital ReadWorks* sidebar, page 19). This is really too bad, as text sets are such a great way to provide students with background knowledge and vocabulary to strengthen reading comprehension.

## Conclusion

ReadWorks is a valuable resource that provides teachers with a wealth of reading comprehension resources at no cost. The passages, text sets, lessons, comprehension units, and novel study units are research-based and thoughtfully designed. While there is some inconsistency in terms of passage resources (questions, vocabulary, StepReads, Text Pairs, etc.), the passages are generally high quality and come from reputable sources. The paired passages and text sets have many classroom uses and are a fine way to build student vocabulary and content knowledge. ReadWorks is an excellent site for teachers seeking additional texts, text sets, and lessons to supplement their curriculum.

# ACHIEVE THE CORE

## PART ONE: ONE-STOP SHOPPING FOR COMMON CORE

By Shannon Garrison

Educators' experiences with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) vary depending on the state and district in which they teach. Some have ready access to solid resources and valuable support, while other teachers struggle to understand the new standards, the instructional shifts they encourage, and how to effectively implement them in their classrooms.

### Achieve the Core Overview

[Achieve the Core](#) is a website that provides educators everywhere with a myriad of resources to help implement the Common Core.<sup>19</sup> The professional-development modules, classroom lessons, planning tools, student-writing samples, mathematics tasks, and assessments are exceptionally well designed and available at no cost. It is one-stop shopping for all things CCSS.

Achieve the Core offers “free, ready-to-use classroom resources designed to help educators understand and implement the Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards.” It is hosted by Student Achievement Partners, which is a nonprofit founded by the lead writers of the CCSS.

All lessons on Achieve the Core are CCSS-aligned and specifically designed to help teachers understand and effectively implement these ambitious new standards.

The site has three parts: professional learning, planning and reflection, and classroom resources. Each contains a wealth of information and resources, briefly detailed below. This part one of this review outlines what is available on the site; part two drills down into the text sets you can find there.

Achieve the Core is well organized. Though its sheer number of resources can be overwhelming at first, once familiar with it, the site is easy to navigate. It can be accessed via multiple digital platforms and browsers (Safari, Chrome, and Firefox) and is accessible on an iPad.

As of February 2017, more than 18.2 million resources have been downloaded from the site.



## Professional Learning

The professional-learning category is split into two sections: insight and collaboration.

Under insight, teachers can learn about the Common Core's expectations and its "instructional shifts" through documents, videos, and professional-development modules. An Aligned Instructional Materials blog "covers the latest trends in the field, highlights free Common Core-aligned OER materials, and offers tools to help with important instructional materials decisions."

The collaboration section consists of professional-development modules, a Common Core Knowledge and Practice survey, and information on talking with parents about the Common Core. The survey tool encourages educators and schools "to reflect on their instructional practice and understanding of the Common Core State Standards." The site also offers resources, including parent guides, videos, and presentations to help parents understand the Common Core and support the standards at home.

## Planning and Reflection

The planning and reflection section provides teachers with information and tools to help support CCSS-aligned instruction and is broken into instructional practice and instructional content.

Under the former heading, teachers can find a coaching tool, a lesson-planning tool, and Teaching the Core videos. These can all be used separately, but they were designed to be used together to help teachers create CCSS-aligned lessons. The videos provide teachers with models of such lessons, annotated to call attention to specific features and accompanied by examples of student work and an interview with the featured teacher.

The instructional content section includes resources on text complexity, text-dependent questions for English language arts (ELA), and an overview of math foci by grade level. There are also alignment rubrics, which help teachers judge whether lessons, textbooks, and assessments are aligned to the CCSS.

## Classroom Resources

One of the most useful aspects of Achieve the Core is its ELA/literacy and math classroom resources. Although this blog series focuses on ELA resources, the mathematics section furnishes classroom lessons, tasks that highlight the CCSS instructional shifts, mini-assessments, and a coherence map that focuses on the connections among the standards. Under ELA/literacy, teachers can find K-12 lessons, student-writing samples, assessments, and an academic-word-finder tool, which helps teachers to identify tier-two academic vocabulary (words that are "often vital to comprehension, will reappear in many texts, and are frequently part of word families or semantic networks"). An especially useful feature is that teachers can save classroom resources and lesson plans for either subject to their own account for future use.

### ELA/Literacy Lessons

As of summer 2016, over six hundred teacher-developed K–12 CCSS-aligned classroom lessons were available on Achieve the Core. Though the volume is huge, lessons can easily be filtered by grade level and project category (such as close reading and read-aloud lessons).

The resources are varied and high quality. An especially valuable component of Achieve the Core’s ELA resources is its text sets. In part two of this review, I will explore this instructional tool in detail.

# ACHIEVE THE CORE

## PART TWO: TEXT SETS—BUILDING BLOCKS OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

By Shannon Garrison

It is rare to find an education website that provides classroom lessons, teacher planning tools, and professional development all in one place. *Achieve the Core* does this and more.<sup>20</sup> An especially impressive feature is its text sets, which are collections of texts organized around a specific topic that sequentially build students' knowledge and skills.

Mindful that research indicates that text sets can improve students' reading comprehension, I searched many sites for high-quality, comprehensive text sets. Those on *Achieve the Core* are among the best I have seen. They use a variety of quality texts, are specifically ordered to promote vocabulary development and build background knowledge, and provide teachers with classroom activities and guidance.

As described on the site, text sets are “lessons using a volume of reading on specific topics to support all learners in building background knowledge and vocabulary.” For teachers unfamiliar with this approach, *Achieve the Core* provides background information on how text sets build reading skills, their educational value, and testimonials from teachers who have used them in class. There is also an entire professional-development module dedicated to creating text sets.

As of September 2016, *Achieve the Core* had forty-one text sets in grades K–8 and 9–10 (the majority are for grades K–5). These are divided into two types: expert packs, which are text sets focused on a single topic and purposely ordered to help students build background knowledge and vocabulary, and research packs, which are designed to address a science content standard (based on Next Generation Science Standards), build background knowledge through reading about science, and address Writing Standards 2, 7, and 8 of the CCSS English-language-arts (ELA) standards.

### Expert Packs

As indicated, expert packs focus on a single topic and are intentionally ordered to build background knowledge and vocabulary. *Achieve the Core* emphasizes that “in order for the text sets to be effective, students must read/watch the resources in order. The early texts provide knowledge and vocabulary that scaffold student understanding of the later, more complex texts. When experienced in the correct order, students have demonstrated success with texts they otherwise would struggle with.” In other words, intentional sequencing is key.

Each expert-pack text set begins with a summary of its texts and resources, including a rationale and suggested sequence. It also explains the Common Core instructional shifts that the pack focuses on and highlights the reading standards that it meets. An annotated bibliography provides teachers with a brief synopsis of each text, including length, cost (if any), and where to locate it. Though the majority of texts are available online, some books need to be borrowed or purchased from outside sources. Packs also provide teachers with ideas for supporting struggling students, a guide that explains how to analyze text complexity, and descriptions of suggested classroom activities for each text. The latter is especially helpful for teachers who are new to text sets or unsure of how to implement them. Finally, a glossary with student-friendly definitions is provided at the end of the pack.

Let's take a look at the second-grade expert pack on desert animals to see how students would benefit from this type of text set. The pack consists of ten ordered texts, including fiction and nonfiction books, poetry, articles, videos, and interactive websites. Of these, three books need to be borrowed from the library or purchased through an outside source (approximately \$15 for all three), while the remaining texts are available online. The authors of the pack detail the sequence of the text set and explain their rationale. Students begin by using an interactive website to explore the desert habitat. Then, they document their questions and uncertainties, which set the purpose for their next few readings about specific desert animals. Students continue learning by engaging with various forms of text, including videos and websites. The text set wraps up with students selecting a desert animal of their choice to study. The text set supplies specific activities for each text, as well as cumulative activities that track student knowledge built across texts.

### **Research Packs**

Research packs integrate ELA and science to promote reading and writing across the curriculum and deep understanding of science and ELA writing standards. They include both student and teacher resources. One research pack is available at each grade level from K to 5. As indicated, research-pack text sets focus on single topics and are organized around a research question that guides reading, thinking, and a final writing piece on that topic. They are designed to take about four weeks in grades K–2 and six weeks in grades 3–5. The packs were developed in partnership with the Vermont Writing Collaborative and are very high quality.

The research packs were designed using the “gradual-release” model, whereby students gain increasing independence throughout the research process. They do this by breaking down a research experience into two parts—“become an expert” and “share the knowledge.” In the former, “students work closely with text to develop a rich and full understanding of the science content and gather and organize the information they will need to write about their research question.” In the latter, students use that content knowledge to write an informative piece.

For example, one grade-4 research pack is called “natural disasters.” It focuses on Earth and Space Science standard ESS3.B: “Natural Hazards—A variety of hazards result from natural

processes (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions). Humans cannot eliminate the hazards but can take steps to reduce their impacts.” The research pack contains an introductory text (*A Storm Called Katrina* by Myron Uhlberg), an anchor text (*Storm Warnings: Tornadoes* by Chris Oxlade), and five text pairs that support the anchor text and focus on different types of natural disasters. The texts include nonfiction books, articles, and websites. Each pack includes three related research experiences on the same topic. They are conducted consecutively—first as a whole class, then in a small group, and finally at the individual level. All research packs follow a similar design.

The natural-disasters research pack begins with a whole-class research experience focused on the research question, “What hazards can result from tornadoes, and what can we do to reduce the impact of tornadoes?” Each student is given a seventeen-page packet that includes graphic organizers, questions, and activities to help guide their reading, thinking, learning, and writing. A teacher packet contains sample responses, answers, and writing samples. In this first part, the teacher uses the student packet to lead the class through the research experience to ensure that students gain the skills and conceptual knowledge needed to successfully complete parts two and three.

Next, each small group of students investigates a specific type of natural disaster using the same question stem they used in part one. For example, one group might ask, “What hazards can result from hurricanes, and what can we do to reduce the impact of hurricanes?” Students again receive a packet that supports them through the research process. They are guided through multiple reads of the text, vocabulary discussions, the recording of information, reading for evidence, content discussions, and sharing their learning.

Finally, in the third research experience, students focus on the same science concept but a different type of natural disaster (for example, earthquakes) and complete their project independently. By this point, the students are fairly familiar with the research process and the science content: “They are well-positioned to read, think, take notes, and write successfully on their own.” There is a shorter “individual research packet” that can be used to guide students through the process.

The research packs are an excellent way to integrate reading, writing, and science, and the student and teacher packets contain terrific resources for engaging students in the research process.

### **How Can Teachers Use Achieve the Core's Text Sets in Class?**

Achieve the Core's "expert-pack" text sets are intentionally ordered to build vocabulary and background knowledge, making them a great resource to prepare students for a unit on a specific topic. For example, one fourth- and fifth-grade expert pack deals with the civil rights movement. It would be invaluable if a class is going to read a novel set during this period.

The sets can also be used to help students better understand how texts range in complexity. They are already ordered by complexity, and the pack includes a text-complexity guide. This helps teachers steer their students through an analysis of text features and promotes discussion of what makes a text complex.

Teachers can use the research packs to strengthen science instruction through the integration of text sets. Building background knowledge and vocabulary is key to conceptual understanding, and this is especially important in science, where many students have limited experience. Research packs provide multiple paths to access vocabulary and science concepts while strengthening reading comprehension and other language arts skills. They can also be used as a model for how to integrate text sets in other content areas, such as social studies. For instance, teachers can use the graphic organizers and activities to guide their own text set development.

### **What are the Greatest Strengths of Achieve the Core's Text Sets?**

It is difficult to find pre-assembled, high-quality text sets, and they are time consuming to create, so the resources on Achieve the Core are extremely valuable to teachers.

One of their greatest strengths is that they are intentionally arranged to help build student vocabulary and background knowledge in order to strengthen reading comprehension. Of course, it's possible to arrange texts in order to build both of these things without taking into consideration text complexity. But these sets do it all: they build background knowledge and vocabulary around a single topic, while also sequencing texts according to complexity.

The Achieve the Core text sets also include a variety of text types and texts of varying complexity. As teachers, we know the importance of exposing students to as many different types of texts as possible. Achieve the Core's text sets include books, articles, poems, songs, speeches, historical documents, web sites, videos, and more.

Well-thought-out, quality activities also guide teachers through the use of the site's ready-to-use text sets. The expert packs include suggested classroom activities for each of the texts included in the set. These are especially helpful for teachers who are new to text sets. The research packs provide both teacher and student with loads of helpful information, which guide them in teaching and learning the research process.

### How Might Text Sets on Achieve the Core Be Improved?

Achieve the Core's text set project focuses on creating text sets for grades K–5, as these are the grades where students develop many of their core reading-comprehension skills. So we find fewer texts sets for middle and high school students and none at all for grades 11 and 12. Developing more text sets for middle and high school students would certainly enhance the utility of these resources.

Another challenge is that using the sets sometimes requires teachers to access hard copies of the books. Though many of the texts included can be found online, teachers often need to track down the books that comprise part of the text sets. Some teachers have the time and resources for this, but it's apt to discourage others. That said, I spent some time researching the availability and cost of the books listed in several text sets. For the most part, it was easy to find them in local libraries and the books were inexpensive, although some were out of print. For the research packs, it should be added, teachers will likely need multiple copies of texts, and these can be more difficult and expensive to obtain.

Finally, the website has so many resources that it can be a bit overwhelming to navigate if you are simply browsing rather than looking for something specific. Once familiar with the organization of the site, however, it is quite easy to find what you are looking for. And the quality of its resources makes it well worth the effort.

### Conclusion

Overall, Achieve the Core contains quality, comprehensive classroom lessons, professional-development modules, and teacher-planning tools that are very helpful to educators searching for resources aligned to the Common Core. The resources are research based and high caliber. The site's unique text sets are designed to promote background knowledge and vocabulary development. They provide teachers with just the right amount of information and guidance to help them effectively use text sets in their classrooms.

The next section compares the respective strengths and weaknesses of all three text set resources reviewed.

# TEXT SETS SUMMARY

## WHICH TEXT SET APPROACH IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

By Shannon Garrison

The use of text sets is a promising instructional approach that is informed by solid research on reading comprehension. A text set is a collection of texts that are tightly focused on a specific topic. As described in *What are “text sets,” and why use them in the classroom?* on page 11, it may include varied genres and media and can be organized in many different ways. But all high-quality text sets have this in common: they are designed to build knowledge of an academic topic and are presented in a specific order with attention to text complexity, vocabulary development, and background knowledge.

However, quality text sets are difficult to find and not easy to create, so identifying resources that can assist is invaluable. [Newsela](#), [ReadWorks](#), and [Achieve the Core](#) are three sites that all provide particularly high-quality text sets for use in the classroom.<sup>21</sup>

All three sites offer useful text set resources, but which best meets an educator’s needs? Table 1 below summarizes some of the most important features and resources on each site.

**Table 1: Comparing Text Sets**

	Newsela	ReadWorks	Achieve the Core
1. Provides high-quality texts aligned to the Common Core	X	X	X
2. Text sets are intentionally ordered			X
3. Assessments are available for each passage	X	X	
4. Assessments are available for the text sets		X	
5. Classroom activities are provided for each text within a text set			X
6. Texts are available at multiple reading levels	X	X	

Let’s discuss each row in turn.



1. All three sites offer access to Common Core–aligned, high-quality texts from a variety of sources. Newsela has relationships with well-known media organizations, such as *The Washington Post*, *Scientific-American*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and the Associated Press, and it posts many news articles daily. Newsela also uses primary-source documents and historical documents in its text sets. ReadWorks has commissioned authors to write many of its passages and has partnerships with organizations such as the National Audubon Society, History.com, and the American Museum of Natural History. Achieve the Core’s text sets have the greatest variability, incorporating a variety of published texts, including books, poems, articles, song lyrics, videos, and websites.

ReadWorks and Achieve the Core offer approximately forty text sets each. Newsela’s site contains more text sets but lacks some of the resources that the other two sites offer. For instance, ReadWorks provides vocabulary resources and questions specific to text sets, while Achieve the Core offers classroom activities specific to each text within a text set.

2. Achieve the Core is the only one of the three sites that purposely orders its text sets with regard to vocabulary development, text complexity, and the building of background knowledge. This is a key characteristic of effective text sets, and teachers should give it due attention. ReadWorks does provide general guidance relative to the reading skills being taught, but its paired passages and text sets are not ordered. Newsela does not provide suggestions or guidance with regard to text order.
3. Both Newsela and ReadWorks offer text-dependent reading-comprehension assessments. Newsela provides four multiple-choice questions and an optional short-answer question for each article. The majority of ReadWorks’ passages contain assessments. These vary in length but usually contain five to ten text-dependent multiple-choice and short-answer questions.
4. ReadWorks provides questions for its passage pairs and text sets. This is unique to ReadWorks and constitutes a strong feature because it requires students to integrate knowledge from more than one text.
5. Achieve the Core provides guidance on how to use text sets by providing Common Core–aligned activities for each text as well as additional resources such as graphic organizers. The other two sites provide general guidance on the use of text sets and even have a few sample lesson plans, but Achieve the Core’s activities and implementation guides are much more thorough.
6. Both Newsela and ReadWorks offer multiple versions of texts to meet the needs of struggling readers. ReadWorks offers more accessible versions of many passages (a feature called StepReads) but not all passages. Newsela does this best by providing each article at five distinct Lexile levels. The site also continually assesses a student’s reading performance and adjusts the article level assigned to each student accordingly.

When it comes to usability (not shown in Table 1, page 31), ReadWorks is the easiest of the three sites to navigate. Although all three are well designed, ReadWorks has a straightforward format and clear, easy-to-use search functions. A teacher can swiftly find paired passages at specific grade levels that are focused on specific topics or skills. The only drawback is that it is difficult to find the text sets on the ReadWorks site, as this site does not have its own search feature.

Individually and together, Newsela, ReadWorks, and Achieve the Core provide teachers with online text set resources that can be integrated into any instructional program to help build vocabulary, background knowledge, and strengthen reading comprehension.

# READING TOOLS (OTHER)

# CURRICULET

## PART ONE: VIRTUAL LIBRARY ON DEMAND

By Melody Arabo

It's October and you're finally settling in to the school year. You've gotten to know your students, assessed their reading levels, and planned diligently for instruction. Now you just need the right tools to help them—more specifically, a range of text that can meet their needs. Enter [Curriculet](#).<sup>22</sup>

### Curriculet Overview

Curriculet is an online digital library of books and news articles intended to be used as independent reading to supplement any curriculum.<sup>23</sup> According to its website, “More than 1,000,000 students and teachers in 10,000 schools love to learn and read on Curriculet,” and its resources are accessible on all devices. With books and articles geared toward grades 3–12, Curriculet strengthens a classroom library by offering online books and texts that teachers can individually or collectively assign to students.

Curriculet's website has a clean and professional feel, with colorful photographs and a brief introductory video explaining the site's purpose and content. Its partners include well-known book and textbook publishers, such as Simon and Schuster and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Although texts are available in a wide variety of genres, both fiction and nonfiction, the library includes mostly narrative books. Free and paid texts are available. There is also an option of subscribing to *USA Today* for nonfiction news articles (teachers can request a forty-five-day free trial for this option).

Curriculet includes both reading content and student-assessment capabilities. Once a teacher has assigned a text, students are provided interactive “checkpoints” as they move through it, which helps keep them engaged as they read. Some contain content-specific multiple-choice questions where students receive instant feedback on whether their answers are right or wrong (what the site calls “in-the-moment feedback”). Others are comprised of free-response questions or annotations with additional content, photos, videos, and reading tips. For example, in the book *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate, the author makes reference to a “mighty silverback,” and when students click on the photo icon, they see an explanation of a silverback gorilla. At the end of each text, students take a quiz covering what they've read. Teachers receive their quiz scores and free-response answers, along with reports including time read, percentage of text completed, and the number of books and news stories read. Each text and all its associated curriculum is called a curriculet.

Helpfully for many educators, this program is intended to align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Content-specific questions accompanying each text (both multiple choice and open response) are cross-referenced with the standards they cover. For example, if I assign a student to read *Holes* by Louis Sachar, she will be asked to identify the point of view of the story, aligned with CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.6, which requires that students describe characters, settings, or events using evidence from the text.

One significant weakness is the store's search feature, which does not allow users to select texts based on Lexile level or interest outside of basic categories such as new releases, poetry, children's literature, and historical fiction. Despite this limitation, however, Curriculet is a helpful resources for teachers looking for reputable reading texts and accompanying assessments that can be used for either individual students or small groups, depending on reading level and need.

# CURRICULET

## PART TWO: DEEP DIGITAL LIBRARY—ONLY FOR DEEP POCKETS?

By Melody Arabo

Curriculet is tagged as “the best independent reading program available. Period.”<sup>24</sup> But does it live it up to its promise? Let’s take a look at its key strengths and weaknesses.

### Organization and Content

Curriculet’s content is organized logically and is well written and clear, for students and teachers alike. However, though there is a basic search function to locate book titles, it could be greatly improved by enhanced sorting and refining options (such as filtering by individual grade and cost simultaneously).

Because the books come from reputable publishers, I found all of them to be high quality and age appropriate (they are digital versions of the same books that can be bought in bookstores). There are a wide range of text types, as called for by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the questions and tasks are very text dependent (that is, they require students to refer back to the text to answer). Unfortunately, Curriculet does not currently provide questions, videos, and annotations for every Common Core standard, so one may strike out if searching for a specific standard.

Another challenge is that Curriculet’s texts are not sequenced in a particular way, other than by grade-level range, and that they do not build on one another sequentially or increase in complexity, leaving it up to the teacher to use them appropriately. Depending on the books that are selected and the content of the curriculum, curriculets can be integrated into a larger curriculum set or other classroom resources and teachers can add their own higher- or lower-level questions and annotations (a note of explanation or comment added to a text or diagram). The *USA Today* articles are well organized and visually appealing but not terribly timely (for instance, when I searched for current events topics, such as the presidential election, I found articles from April 2015 about Marco Rubio but not much else more recent). However, I loved that I could click on elementary, middle, or high school levels to see similar content at different levels, much like the offerings at Newsela.com.

### Usability and Features

Overall, Curriculet is fairly straightforward for teachers to use. Once teachers have set up a new class on the site and invited students to enroll, they can go to the Curriculet store and start selecting texts. They can search by categories, such as classics, fantasy, and nonfiction; by texts that are free and/or labeled “99¢ titles;” and by grade levels, starting with grades 3–4 up to

grades 11–12. I searched free titles first, as I think most teachers would do, but I did not see many titles that would work for third graders. Instead, I searched grades 3–4 and was provided titles that range in cost from \$0.99 for two months to \$4.40 for three months, which I assume means it is a rental rather than a purchase. I would have appreciated a way to sort the books by price once I was in the appropriate grade level, but that is not an option. The only free books that were appropriate for lower grades were those linked to ReadWorks.org.

Overall, Curriculet provides an engaging, interactive experience for students, though I strongly suggest that students use this resource on a computer rather than a mobile device for ease of use. While the website claims otherwise, I had a difficult time accessing the materials on my iPhone and iPad. When I logged in as a test student on my phone, for example, it was quite difficult to navigate through the pages of the book. Google Chrome is the suggested web browser for this program, though others work fine.

In terms of the full teacher experience, it initially took me a while to understand the way Curriculet is organized, so I experienced a significant learning curve when trying to set it up and get going. Although there are printed guides that may help teachers through the set up process, several steps were especially time consuming, such as figuring out how to set up a class and student list, how to have students sign up using the given codes, how to add books to a digital library, and how to find the data once students began completing assignments. Once I surmounted that initial learning curve, however, I could confidently say that it is easy for teachers and students to use (even third graders, such as my own).

A major strength is that the student performance data that the site provides is useful and easy to understand. Students can access texts at school or at home, so I could see giving assignments that kids need to complete as homework and then spending time in class debriefing and fostering discussions about the questions. Because the site sells rentals for teachers and students, I could also see using this resource in class to offer guided reading instruction, where the teacher is reading along with the students and providing instruction on decoding, oral accuracy, metacognition, and overall understanding.

### Cost

I found Curriculet's pricing system to be quite confusing. Curriculet offers unlimited use of books and articles for \$24.99 per student per year, which makes the pricing clearer for budgetary purposes but is a hefty cost for a classroom of thirty or more students. Teachers can also purchase individual texts, but it is unclear whether they can use these texts with all students in their classes or just one student (I emailed Curriculet's technical-support team several weeks ago, but have not heard back). The prices and rental length vary, so it is difficult for teachers to predict how many resources they'll need for their students (and how much they will cost). This is a particular challenge for schools and classrooms with limited budgets (and aren't they all?). For example, I receive a certain amount of funding from our school's PTA to use toward whatever classroom resources or materials I may need. If I commit to using Curriculet, I have no

way of knowing how far those funds will take me because I may need to purchase five books or twenty-five books, depending on my students' needs. Or sometimes teachers ask parents to pay a specific amount for a resource at the beginning of the year. It would be difficult for teachers to make this request of parents if the teacher cannot anticipate how many books a student might need or how much they will each cost, unless they commit to the \$24.99 yearly per-student cost. In my opinion, there are not enough free books to commit to Curriculet as a dedicated resource for the school year.

### Free Text Experience

Despite my dissatisfaction with pricing, I wanted to give Curriculet a fair shot. I decided to try a free book and pay for a book to glean differences in how teachers can use each. As the only free options for my third graders were ReadWorks books, I added one of those to my classroom library. I chose a ReadWorks passage called *Experiments*, which focuses on conducting food experiments. When I access the book from my teacher page, I like that I can see the book cover, its Lexile (or reading ability) level, questions that will be asked of the reader, and quizzes that are built in (as well as a preview of each). Suggested answers for the question set are also included, which is especially helpful. Teachers can also edit the Curriculet activities that are already provided or add their own, but because most teachers want something that is already created (and the ones I tried seemed sufficient), I decided to stick with what I had.

To get a sense of a student's experience, I logged in as a test student on my iPhone and moved through the same ReadWorks text. Navigating was initially difficult, but once I figured out how to swipe through the pages, a multiple-choice question popped up on the third page. I intentionally answered it incorrectly and the site corrected my answer and prompted me to try again. The second time a question popped up it was a constructed response where I had to type in my answer. I wrote something that didn't any sense and was told my answer had been submitted (but did not receive further feedback). At the end of the text, I was prompted to take a quiz, and was given an overall score at the end. The quizzes would be helpful to foster accountability for the students and provide feedback to the teachers, which aren't typically included in most printed books and texts.

Another particularly useful feature is that teachers can use Curriculet to track student progress. A data tab appears after students have completed accomplished tasks. Once I clicked on the data tab, I had to select the class, then the assignment, and then the test student. Though it took a while to get there, the data were clear and useful. I was able to see the student's average quiz grade, average time on task reading and interacting with the book, the percentage of homework each student completed, and the percentage who responded to Curriculet's embedded questions. I was also able to review the student's answers to the open-ended questions and comment with feedback, which is important and clearly a strength of the program (though it's up to teachers to share this feedback with students).



### Paid Text Experience

Next I assigned the \$0.99 book, *The One and Only Ivan*. The teacher page indicated that this book would be accompanied by sixty-five questions, fifteen annotations, and three quizzes. That seemed a bit overwhelming, but in contrast to the free text I tested out, this is a lengthy chapter book that could be broken up and assigned over a longer period of time. Navigating through the pages on the iPhone as the student was just as difficult with the paid text as with the free text. Questions worked the same way, both for multiple-choice and open-ended questions. I noticed a new photo icon that included information that supported the photo and the text of the book, which is a great feature that did not appear in the free version. As mentioned in part one of this review, in *Ivan*, the author makes reference to a “mighty silverback,” and when students click on the photo icon, they get an explanation of that type of gorilla. I wanted to skip ahead and could do so by touching the Curriculet icon in the corner, selecting the table of contents, and choosing a chapter from the end. After I completed the book as a student, the report I received as the teacher was the same as with the free book, except with a larger number of questions and quizzes. The paid resources definitely add a level of depth to the books and greater variety of information and activities for the students, so there is added benefit to paying more, as one would expect. Ideally, the unlimited yearly subscription for each student would be the best way to go if the school could afford it, and then teachers would have an almost endless, incredible digital library for instruction and assessment at their fingertips.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

In terms of Curriculet’s biggest weaknesses, initial setup of this tool is challenging, confusing, and time consuming. Every second of a teacher’s day is valuable, so resources need to be clear and efficient. The various cost options are also somewhat confusing and, as described earlier, would be difficult for schools with firm budget restrictions (it would be simpler if the site had a flat subscription fee that could provide endless access to the great books that are available, for example). The ease of use on devices is pretty poor, as well, so students would need computers to get the most out of Curriculet. And finally, an improved search function would help teachers find specific resources more readily.

If one can get past those four flaws, the system has many strengths. As a teacher, I love that there are thousands of high-quality books and news articles available with built-in questions, annotations, and quizzes written by educators and aligned with the CCSS. The student-level data collected by the site are really helpful and provide accountability for students as well as instructional guidance for teachers. As such, Curriculet can be a powerful tool as a supplemental reading resource, but given its current functionality (and cost), it falls short of being “the best independent reading program available.”

# LEXIA READING CORE5

## PART ONE: CAN A COMPUTER PROGRAM DIFFERENTIATE READING INSTRUCTION?

By Melody Arabo

Many educators struggle with finding resources that can help educators teach reading skills in a comprehensive yet individualized way. In a typical elementary classroom of thirty or more students, children can range in ability so much that instruction must be drastically differentiated to meet each pupil's needs. As a third-grade teacher, I am constantly on the hunt for tools that can minimize my preparation time and maximize instructional time with kids. [Lexia Reading Core5](#) is a promising reading program that can help teachers meet those goals.<sup>25</sup>

### Lexia Reading Core5 Overview

According to its [website](#), Lexia Reading Core5 “supports educators in providing differentiated literacy instruction for students of all abilities in grades pre-K–5” (as defined by Carol Tomlinson, differentiated instruction is “an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for student differences in classrooms”).<sup>26</sup> The site also includes embedded assessments that deliver “norm-referenced performance data and analysis without interrupting the flow of instruction to administer a test” (norm referenced is a type of test that reveals whether the test taker performed better or worse than other test takers, not whether the test taker knows more or less than necessary for a given purpose). Lexia Core5 (hereafter Core5) is intended for elementary grades and is designed to be fully aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Each skill matches a particular strand of the CCSS standards, which are clearly stated alongside lessons and activities. Though designed as a stand-alone curriculum, it can also be used as a supplemental program to reinforce reading strategies. According to a site representative, over 2.6 million students used Core5 in 2015–16.

Core5 is an adaptive program that operates like a game. Students begin with on-grade-level activities, and the program adapts to become more or less challenging based on their performance; as students master activities, they go up levels. Each level has interactive online activities, which students work through on their own. Helpfully, assessments accompany each online lesson, and additional paper-and-pencil assignments are also provided to reinforce what the student has learned once he or she completes the online portion.

For example, I selected level fifteen from the demo, which is a beginning fourth-grade lesson on the Great Barrier Reef. I was greeted by colorful, cartoon-like graphics of the deep sea. I then chose a category from a menu, which includes Root Meanings, Sight Words 7, Passage Fluency 4, Multiple Meaning Words 2, and Passage Comprehension 4. It is unclear what the numbers represent, but I chose to work on Multiple Meaning Words. The next screen indicated that this is

a vocabulary activity connected to standard L.4.4a, which asks students to demonstrate understanding that words can have multiple meanings. I was provided an example with two fill-in-the-blank sentences with three potential words that seemingly could fit into either sentence. The kind woman's voice that narrated the activity told me that "bat" is the only word of the choices that will make sense in both sentences. Then it was my turn to try. Sentence one was, "I put on my \_\_\_\_\_ at night." Sentence two was, "I am your number one \_\_\_\_\_" The three words I had to choose from were "toy", "fan", and "light." Though I knew that "fan" was being used in two different contexts correctly, I chose "toy" to see how the questions will adapt. I was prompted to try again with the two remaining choices. I again chose the incorrect answer. After telling me I was "not quite" right, the narrator explained how "fan" makes sense in both sentences. The next question was easier. Instead of three words to choose from, I was provided one word and two fill-in-the-blank sentences and was tasked with deciding in which sentence the word fit better. The computer adapted to my level of performance.

For teachers, there are a wealth of scripted lessons to help guide instruction, suggestions for when a student is struggling with the online activity, and recommendations on how to integrate the activity into classroom instruction. Additionally, a supplied scope and sequence explains target student skills for all grades in six "areas of reading instruction," which include identifying and manipulating syllables ("phonological awareness"), recognizing word parts and roots ("structural analysis"), vocabulary, and comprehension. A color-coded PDF chart summarizes this scope and sequence, which I would likely print and post with my reading material as a reminder and as a way to check student growth and progress. This high-level information is very helpful to a teacher, and I like the fact that it's organized and explained succinctly.

### Pricing

Unfortunately for most educators working with restricted budgets, Core5's resources are not free. Although standard pricing information for classroom subscriptions is not published on the site, a representative shared that Lexia's base price for a subscription student license for one year is \$40 per student (and the program can be purchased school-wide for \$9,900 annually, which includes professional development for teachers and staff). A homeschool version is advertised at \$174.98 per student (and \$109 for each additional student in the same family). Though exact classroom costs are unknown, we can plausibly expect that, with a classroom of up to thirty-two students, Core5 may be too expensive for the typical elementary teacher and would need to be funded by the school or district.

# LEXIA READING CORE5

## PART TWO: TEST-DRIVING LEXIA CORE5

By Melody Arabo

For teachers looking for high-quality online reading resources, [Lexia Reading Core5](#) (Core5) is one promising—yet pricey—option.<sup>27</sup> Let us examine the site’s key features, strengths, and weaknesses and how it might be useful to classroom teachers.

### Usability, Features, and Functions

Core5 can be accessed on a web browser, an iPad or Android tablet, or installed locally on a computer. It offers clear and sufficient guidance for teachers on how to set up and implement the program and then gather data on student performance. The site is well organized and easy for both teachers and pupils to use because it moves students through the activities step by step (and cleverly adapts based on their performance). It is also likely to keep kids engaged, thanks to its colorful background, pictures, and music.

In the free-trial version of Core5, I had limited access to four levels of the student program: beginning mid-Kindergarten, beginning second grade, beginning fourth grade, and beginning fifth grade (though, as described previously, the full site offers content for pre-K through fifth grade). The entire program ostensibly provides educators with ongoing student data and the appropriate resources to address each student’s needs. (While I couldn’t access the full program without a paid subscription, a site representative explained that Lexia’s educator reports provide detailed data on student usage and performance at the district, school, class, and student levels.) Each of the three trial levels included various activities that provide personalized learning in key areas of reading instruction and skill (such as phonics, automaticity, and vocabulary).

A major strength of Core5 is that its content appears to be grade-level appropriate, well-written and clear. It is designed as a stand-alone resource, and the site does not offer suggestions for integrating it into a larger curriculum. But it is excellent for teaching students many of the narrative and informational reading skills called for by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In my view, any tool offering extra practice of necessary skills—such as phonological awareness and vocabulary development—could work well as a supplementary resource, even if it’s designed to stand alone.

For example, the theme of one third-grade level activity was “Indian Rainforest.” When you click on one of the associated lessons, it tells you the focus as well as the specific CCSS standard to which it’s aligned (the first lesson in the third-grade level told me that it was a spelling lesson and that it matched language arts standard L.3.2e, which requires students to spell high-frequency words and add suffixes to base words). The instruction is clear and concise with

effective examples. The lesson leads into independent practice where students apply the rule they learned about one word at a time (for example, the narrator asks the student to “spell the word begging,” while the screen shows “beg + ing =”; students then type “begging” after the equals sign). If they supply the correct answer, they get a green checkmark and move on to the next question. If they get it wrong, the site provides feedback so the students will understand their errors. Though the colorful animations give a game-like feel, the activity does not change throughout the lesson, so it becomes redundant. I could see kids getting bored easily.

For reading passages, the tool provides visually appealing text that kids can scroll through and read at their own pace, with multiple-choice questions integrated as comprehension checks. If students choose the wrong answer, the site brings the specific portion of the text back up on the screen with the additional answer options. This is a great touch, as it gives students a chance to revisit selected text to better understand the question and possible answers. If a student gets the answer wrong a second time, it will highlight the portion of the text that leads to the correct choice. This helpful feature strengthens both comprehension and test-taking skills by eliminating unlikely answers, prompting students to go back to the text and locate evidence to prove their answers—all of which are skills we teach and practice in class. In general, the texts I reviewed were both high quality and grade appropriate. According to the site, selections are sequenced to build content knowledge and vocabulary, and they increase in complexity as students progress. Core5 includes both informational and narrative text, as called for by CCSS, and the questions and tasks are appropriately text dependent (that is, they require students to refer back to the text to answer).

Overall, I can see how both students and teachers would benefit from this program. Students get individualized instruction and practice on critical reading skills. And teachers, with the paid subscription, can gather valuable data that will help guide their instructional decisions for individual students.

### Impact on Student Learning

Unlike many existing online resources, several studies have been conducted to assess Core5’s effectiveness. For example, a 2015 [study](#) conducted by Lexia’s own research team found that about a third of elementary-aged summer-school students lowered their risk of reading failure and were in a stronger position at the beginning of the next school year than if they had not used Core5.<sup>28</sup> Another recent [study](#) conducted by LEAP Innovations found that “students using Lexia Core5 gained an additional 1.42 test-score points above what the control group gained. This is equivalent to closing the achievement growth gap by 60 percent for low-income students.”<sup>29</sup>

Such “effectiveness information” is valuable for educators who have a near-endless amount of curricula and online resources from which to choose.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

Overall, Lexia Core 5 is well organized, thorough, and easy to follow, covering many components of reading instruction. The site is engaging for students, aligned to the CCSS, and provides real-time, actionable performance data for teachers (as well as additional instructional tools and resources). It is a welcome tool for differentiating instruction and practice for all students.

The site's biggest weakness is its cost. Teachers looking to enhance their classrooms may need to look for something more affordable—or free. But if this is something in which administrators will invest, existing research indicates Core5 has the potential to make a positive school-wide impact. This would definitely make the tough task of differentiating instruction easier for teachers, as that feature is built into the program and happens automatically as students progress. There would be virtually no preparation for the teacher, which is always the biggest challenge.

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# WRITING TOOLS

# QUILL

## PART ONE: A GRAMMAR GURU'S BEST FRIEND

By Tabitha Pacheco

As an educator, I'm always looking for new tools to enhance my teaching and engage my students. In my search for online supplemental curricula, I found a plethora of online resources for reading and math but struggled to find online writing tools. One welcome exception—and a particularly promising writing tool—is [Quill](#).<sup>30</sup>

### Quill Overview

Quill is a free online website that provides learning activities for students in grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. It's essentially a database of digital worksheets aligned to the Common Core writing standards. According to its customer-service representative, over 21,000 teachers and 285,000 students use Quill. The site includes a basic package, which is free, and a teacher premium package, which costs eighty dollars per year. The main difference is the level of detail provided in the student reports available to teachers (more on that later).

The site includes (in the free version) over 150 writing activities designed for grades 1–12. The activities are said to align with forty-two of the English language arts (ELA) Common Core standards across various grade levels, with each activity referencing the standards to which it aligns. In addition to activities by grade level, there are also activities designed for English language learners.

Quill's typical format takes students through several short, related activities in the course of teaching a grammar standard (the set takes about ten minutes to complete). For example, standard 1.1G, "use frequently occurring conjunctions," is broken into three activities: two sentence-writing activities focused on common conjunctions and a final proofreading activity that assesses students' understanding of the standard. Feedback on the completed activity is automatically generated based on the students' responses. For example, a first-grade activity on prepositions directs students to rewrite the following sentence: "The salty smell reminds me [from/of] the beach." At the other end of the grade spectrum, a tenth-grade activity on using parallel structure (standard 10.1A) asks students to rewrite this sentence: "The musician likes to listen to new music by other artists or creating his own music" (not unsurprisingly, there are far fewer grammar activities for middle and high school than for elementary-age students).

The site uses a wide variety of materials and genres, including fiction, mythology and historical documents. For example, one of the fourth-grade historical readings is "The Last Flight of the Apollo: The Apollo-Soyuz Test Mission" and one of the ninth-grade texts is a short biography of James Joyce.



All of the activities require students to respond to a reading passage in writing (no multiple-choice options) and, if their responses are incorrect, to try again. Directions are provided for each activity and there is an example problem and grammatical tips, so students are clear on what is expected. For instance, an activity on how to use colons in a list would provide sample sentences with and without correct colon usage and also a list of key grammar rules (such as “colons can only be used after complete sentences”). Students are then directed to rewrite a sentence like this with proper colons: “I need three items milk, eggs, and bread.”

Students must write in complete sentences and click a “check work” link afterwards. A “well done” message appears for a correct response; if the response is incorrect, a prompt directs the students to try again, along with a rule reminder or another tip. If the rewritten response still contains errors, the students are shown the correct response with the corrections underlined.

Quill also recently launched two new tools that have been in development for over a year. The site now includes a diagnostic test that teachers can use to place students in appropriate Quill lessons (more details in the forthcoming post), as well as Quill Connect, which helps students learn to write complex sentences. In Quill Connect, students are asked to combine two separate sentences given a list of joining words. For example, students could be given the following two sentences:

Surfers feel the wave.

They begin paddling.

The students must join the sentences using the following given options: as soon as, although, and while (the correct answer would be, “As soon as surfers feel the wave, they begin paddling”). The complete sentence must be typed using proper capitalization and punctuation in order for the answer to be correct. For emerging writers who often write short sentences, I can see how learning to combine thoughts for more complex sentences would improve their writing skills.

### How Can Quill Be Incorporated Into an ELA Classroom?

In my class, I would use Quill activities for independent practice following a whole-group lesson. If a classroom held enough computers, all students could work on their assigned activities at the same time. With limited computers, Quill could be used as a class warm-up activity, an activity for students who finish tasks before their peers, or as a station activity for small-group rotations. Quill activities could also be assigned as home practice in grammar, assuming students can get online at home. Because Quill is essentially grammar worksheets in an online format and not an educational game site that tracks incentives for students (such as [DreamBox](#) or [FunBrain](#)), I would probably not use it as a part of my classroom reward system.<sup>31</sup>

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When used appropriately, technology can enhance and supplement a teacher's instruction. Plus, our digitally obsessed students appreciate a break from traditional paper-and-pencil practice for gauging mastery of grammar skills and would welcome some computer-based writing practice. Quill gives them that.

Part two discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the Quill tool in more detail.

# QUILL

## PART TWO: QUELLING WRITING PROBLEMS WITH QUILL

By Tabitha Pacheco

Quill is essentially an online database of digital worksheets aligned to the Common Core English language arts (ELA) writing standards.<sup>32</sup> This tool offers many advantages but also raises several concerns.

### The Positives

Teachers will find Quill very easy to use. They can sort activities based on grade level, type of activity (writing or editing), or writing and grammatical concepts (such as adjectives and adverbs, comma usage, commonly confused words, prepositions, and punctuation). They can assign students an individual activity, a premade pack—put together by the site—that bundles several activities keyed to a single grammar concept, or a custom pack devised by the teacher that tailors activities to the needs of the class or individual students. These activities are simple to assign to one student or the whole class. Plus, assigning them as homework means that teachers don't need to worry about worksheets being lost in backpacks.

Teachers can sign up for Quill via their email or their Google user information. If teachers utilize Google Classroom, they can simply import the Google class roster; otherwise, they must manually add each student's name. The teachers give students a class code to create their logins. Although I found this process simple and intuitive, the site does offer step-by-step PDF guides and videos for creating teacher and student accounts.

Students will also find the site easy to access and use. They can log into it from school computers or home devices. Quill has computer, tablet, and smartphone capabilities, although it's hard to imagine effectively completing writing tasks on a smartphone. The site runs on most browsers, including Chrome, Safari, and Firefox. All of the site's activities are self-explanatory with a nondistracting background and an easy-to-read font.

Another nice feature is that the site is equipped with a live-chat feature to ask questions of the Quill team, so if students work on Quill from home, they can get their questions answered in real time. Teachers can also use this live-chat option, which may be particularly helpful as they are familiarizing themselves with the site.

Teachers can now also assess student needs quickly by using the site's new diagnostic tool, which automatically creates lesson plans based on the results of the diagnostic. Teachers can view the class-wide results of the diagnostic test to help plan whole class lessons or can dig into individual student scores to see how each student performed or answered a specific question.

The grading system that Quill utilizes is a definite plus. Students receive immediate feedback on their work, which saves teachers time in grading worksheets. Students have two opportunities to respond to the activity prompt, so they cannot get stuck on a single prompt. Quill uses immediate error correction by providing the correct response to erroneous answers, so students aren't left repeating errors or guessing.

One particularly useful feature of Quill is that teachers can easily view class reports that place students in proficiency groupings of green ("at proficient" 76–100 percent), yellow ("nearly proficient" 75–50 percent), and red ("not proficient" 49–0 percent). After students complete their assigned activities, teachers can view basic reports for the class and for individual students. As students complete activities, the boxes will turn green, yellow, or red, depending on their proficiency level. Gray boxes indicate that a student has not yet completed the activity. The free version of Quill allows teachers to access this basic level of student reports and tracks information such as lowest-performing students and the most difficult concepts for your class. The additional paid features include reports to show progress on Common Core standards and enable teachers to export student data.

### The Negatives

Quill is not a game-based educational tool. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but students who need the motivation of earning points or a cartoon avatar to keep them engaged may not be excited by this site. The activities are set up as work, not play.

The activities and basic reporting on student performance are enough to make the free version of Quill useful to teachers. However, for detailed reports on individual student proficiency, teachers must purchase the premium package, as described above. Quill can't be used as a progress-monitoring tool for individual students unless that premium package is acquired. If teachers want to collect writing-proficiency data on individual students to inform a recommendation of RTI or special-education services, they would need the premium package.

Another disadvantage of Quill is the lack of information posted on the site regarding accessibility features for students who may require accommodations. The site lacks some built-in accessibility features found on other sites, such as screen readers. When I contacted customer service for more details on their accessibility options, they responded that although they do not offer a built-in screen reader, their site is compatible with most screen-reader software programs. Students who are not yet able to read fluently may struggle to read and respond to writing activities on their own. That said, I do not believe this site is targeting remedial learners; it is geared to measure student proficiency at grade level.

This is also not the right site for writing lengthy essays. Activities focus on grammar, editing, and sentence-writing skills. Because grammar is the primary focus, there are far more activities for elementary students. Only two grammar activities are designed specifically for twelfth grade Common Core standards. Quill is therefore most beneficial for teachers in an elementary school setting.

The Common Core calls for a balance of text types and specifically states that science and history texts should be integrated with traditional literary texts. Although Quill does an excellent job in providing historical readings and a variety of fictional and mythological passages, it does not provide texts related to science and other STEM areas. That's disappointing.

### **Final Thoughts**

After poring over this site and exploring its activities, I definitely recommend Quill to elementary language arts teachers. The most significant advantage is that the tool measures proficiency on the grammar-specific skills that students are expected to acquire under the Common Core standards. It also reduces the amount of grading, so it will save teachers time—and with the growing number of responsibilities that teachers have, that is a beautiful thing!

# WRITELIKE

## PART ONE: TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE LIKE THE GREATS

By Jonathan S. Budd and Victoria McDougald

It may not be a word in Webster’s, but Writelike ought to be, at least according to those of us who have an interest in helping our students become excellent writers. Many lament the decline of writing from “the good ole’ days” and claim that our students can’t write the way that Americans used to write.<sup>33</sup> Fortunately, *Writelike*—which aims to improve higher-order literacy—offers an excellent solution through careful analysis of the masters and re-creation of their stylistic traits.<sup>34</sup> Best of all, much of what Writelike accomplishes is so user-friendly and game-like that students could be trapped into learning before they even realize it.

### Writelike Overview

Developed by *Liquid Interactive* with a target audience of middle school students and their teachers, Writelike meets a modern need to challenge writers into new ways of developing their craft, in this case by emulating great writers of centuries past and current.<sup>35</sup> The site includes exercises, drills, lessons, and courses that are all graduated in complexity and that work toward the stated aim of “help[ing] users creatively write in different ways.”

Exercises include challenges: reading a sentence, clearing it from the screen, and then attempting to reproduce it verbatim from memory; reordering sentences to get them in the proper narrative progression; or rewriting the content of a text into a different style (such as a fable or book review).

Drills are packaged groups of certain challenges (such as spelling and punctuation practice) that can be accessed by either a student or her teacher seeking to hone in on a particular text type, genre, or topic.

The meat, however, is in the lessons. Each lesson is a self-guided series of scaffolded learning activities (that is, instruction that progressively helps students master a task or topic) related to a key topic of writing, from semicolons, similes, and metaphors to describing someone’s attitude. Want to analyze Poe’s style in detail? Or Rowling’s? There are also lessons on how to mimic a particular writer’s language and style. In essence, each lesson begins with direct instruction, moves to guided practice, and ends with independent (or rewrite) practice. For instance, a lesson on J.K. Rowling’s *Deathly Hallows* begins with a sample passage demonstrating how to “use language to create an uneasy sense of vulnerability.” After studying the original passage, the student completes brief exercises with similar passages and then writes his own variation in the same style.

Writelike's lessons differ significantly from those in typical writing workbooks. The lessons that are focused more discretely on grammar (such as learning about adjectives and adverbs) are interactive and sophisticated yet simple to master. And the lessons that are more broadly stylistic start with the premise that existing literature is a treasure trove for improving ourselves as writers. For instance, Writelike compares Stoker's *Dracula* and Meyer's *Twilight*, illustrating their "similar narrative spine" yet varied sentence length, use of conjunctions, and so forth, all in preparation for the learner to rewrite a segment of one text in the style of the other.

Finally, courses are groups of similar lessons intentionally connected for sustained learning goals (such as mastering expressive punctuation or persuasive text writing).

Writelike's free, user-friendly content can be accessed by a student working independently but can also be used by teachers to help students improve their writer's craft. As a site representative explained, the site aims "to build expressive power using the higher-order writing equivalent of soccer or piano exercises." Teachers who create a free account can use the site to assign existing lessons and drills to students, as well as check student work and provide students with feedback. Writelike also "provides authoring tools so you can create your own lessons," using texts of one's choosing.

Though Writelike's lessons aren't yet designed with specific academic standards in mind, its lessons do reflect many of the major instructional shifts called for by Common Core, such as grounding reading and writing in evidence from a text.

Part two, which follows, provides a deeper examination of Writelike's most notable strengths and limitations and final thoughts on its overall quality.

# WRITELIKE

## PART TWO: IMITATION AS THE BEST FORM OF FLATTERY AND WRITING SUCCESS?

By Jonathan S. Budd and Victoria McDougald

As described previously, *Writelike* is designed to strengthen a writer's craft through analysis, writing exercises, and emulation of master authors.<sup>36</sup> How does this design translate into strengths and weaknesses for the user?

### What are *Writelike's* Most Notable Strengths?

*Writelike's* greatest strength is the creative way in which it exposes students to numerous authentic literary excerpts and strong texts that they can read and emulate. The interactive exercises are fun and will likely keep students engaged, while helping to improve important writing skills such as writing in different styles, rearranging sentences into the correct order, and proper spelling, punctuation, and grammar (grammatical elements notably get more sophisticated treatment than in typical grammar texts: fragments are handled in a category amusingly entitled "four and a half types of sentences," for example).

The activities themselves are also user-friendly. Exercises and drills allow users to check their answers instantly as they progress, and the site also offers ongoing assistance for students struggling with a given exercise (students having trouble with a timed memory exercise can access a certain number of "peeks" back at the original text as they attempt to replicate it, for example, or can retry the exercise). *Writelike* also embeds student-friendly encouragement at difficult moments (for example, "If you're confused, that's good. This is a big topic. Let's get to work"). Overall, it sends an important message to students: Even professionally published writing can be subject to revision.

*Writelike's* resources are also impressively expansive: The variations in drills, lessons, and courses appear endless because the user can keep requesting new text excerpts to analyze and emulate and can progress with as few tries or hints as possible. And in line with Common Core's shifts for English language arts (ELA) and literacy, the activities require students to analyze and engage closely with a variety of texts.



It's also fairly easy for teachers to search for activities to fit an instructional need. Courses, drills, and lessons are tagged for easy browsing, including the time required for participation, text and genre type, and difficulty level; each activity also includes an overview description and purpose. Teachers also have the ability to create their own course, drill, or lesson, and inquiries submitted via the site's contact page were responded to quickly and helpfully.

Finally, and critically for educators on a tight budget, Writelike's content is completely free after setting up an account (and teachers can even sample exercises, drills, lessons, and courses prior to registration).

### What are Writelike's Areas for Improvement?

Writelike is a unique site offering a host of engaging (and free!) writing activities for students, but there are several aspects of the site that could be improved. First, given the variety of activities available, Writelike may be initially overwhelming to a teacher looking for specific activities to incorporate into the classroom. The addition of a brief overview page or PDF clearly explaining Writelike's content and capabilities for educators would be hugely helpful. And though Writelike clearly supports goals of the Common Core's ELA standards, links to the Common Core are not made explicit, so adding more information on which activities best align to specific standards (and allowing educators to search by those) would also be valuable.

Certain literary texts may also be too sophisticated for the typical middle school audience. For example, while Weitz's *A Century of Genocide* is successful contemporary nonfiction, one segment presented by Writelike references rape within the context of specific ethnic fighting. Such a segment, especially out of context, could alarm or disturb students, especially those who may be using the tool in an environment without an adult.

And finally, although the program is designed to require students to produce writing at particular intervals before proceeding to more advanced learning within each lesson, there is no requirement that a particular number of words be produced at any given point—even one character in a box will allow the learner to proceed. In other cases, instructions were a bit too informal: Writelike avoids naming specific grammar rules (for example, using “the things” rather than “the nouns” in highlighted text elements), where it would be more helpful to use the exact terms.

### Final Thoughts

Although Writelike never advertises it, the site's focus on style in written texts directly supports several Common Core anchor standards for writing (such as “producing clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience” and “develop[ing] and strengthen[ing] writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach”). In fact, despite its designers' articulated interest in a middle school audience, Writelike's content would be appropriate for many high school students

and even some college students. Its methods of analyzing and writing about texts transcend middle school limits, and the content itself is of high quality and on topics that would interest a wide range of learners. Clearly, a classroom teacher could link the possibilities of Writelike to other curricular resources that help students build writer's craft in analyzing both their own writing and the writing of others. Even slight changes in a text make a difference, and that's where deep revision sidles in. The game-like design of Writelike is alluring, and when it comes to developing a strong sense of writer's craft, allure is not to be underestimated!

# ICIVICS DRAFTING BOARD

## PART ONE: SIZING UP JUSTICE SANDRA DAY O’CONNOR’S CIVICS WRITING TOOL

By Jonathan S. Budd and Victoria McDougald

We are keenly aware of the challenge in encouraging teachers to work on writing instruction in subject areas other than English language arts (after all, one of us is curriculum director for a midsized K–12 school district). First, teachers need to appreciate that writing well is essential to the study of any subject. Then we must help teachers recognize that their pupils need strategies for learning how to write well within specific subject areas. Absent such strategies, students may be assigned writing yet not know how to get better at it.

Fortunately, tools such as [iCivics Drafting Board](#) can help with writing instruction across subjects, particularly when it comes to the important “argumentative essay.”<sup>37</sup> If you teach social studies at the secondary level, we find Drafting Board well worth a look.

### iCivics Drafting Board Overview

Founded by retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor to enhance civics education across the nation, [iCivics](#) is a website that has grown from five thousand registered teacher users in 2012 to over 110,000 today.<sup>38</sup> The full site provides classroom practitioners with curriculum units, lesson plans, games, and other resources centered on various civic-engagement topics such as the constitution, civil rights, and the three branches of government. Each unit includes an assortment of lesson plans and interactive games that help students learn about and participate in civic life. Additional mini-lessons include brief readings and activities on specific historical figures, events, and court cases that have influenced American government (such as John Locke, the debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, and *Brown vs. Board of Education*).

iCivics also includes three supplemental instructional tools designed to develop specific skills and knowledge. The first is DBQuest, which currently contains just a single unit on civil rights but requires students “to tackle important civic questions using primary source documents and analytical skill.” The second is WebQuests, which includes guided web searches that help students “connect civics topics to the real world” by directing them to other online resources on similar topics. The third tool—and our focus here—is the iCivics Drafting Board, an interactive writing tool that helps students to develop strong argumentative writing skills while exposing them to important social-studies content.

The iCivics website describes Drafting Board as a supplemental instructional tool for middle and high school students “that is most effective with teacher direction as a three-to-five-day persuasive-writing intervention.” The site currently contains seven civics units, but there are

plans to expand the site to offer seventeen. Each unit engages students in a contemporary civics topic, such as the electoral college, voting age, and military intervention. Topics are introduced with brief readings that summarize diverse viewpoints on the topic from real and/or fictional individuals. Students then select evidence from each reading to complete a fictional news story summarizing the issue; after successfully completing the news story, students are prompted to choose one side of the issue to make their claim for an argumentative essay that they will then draft (more on this below).

All resources available on Drafting Board are free, and the program can be accessed through any internet browser. Once registered, teachers can set up online classes for electronic assignment of work and can track individual student and whole-class progress. Each lesson includes detailed teacher instructions as well as printable activity options and guided questions. Drafting Board can be used for whole-class, small-group, or individual instruction and is intended to develop students' civics knowledge while strengthening their ability to analyze information, use evidence to support their claims, and compose written arguments.

The tool is designed to address the Common Core State Standards for English language arts in history, social studies, and civics topics (and, helpfully, includes the ability to search individual units and modules for specific state standards related to each resource).

### **How is the Writing Process Organized?**

In the crafting of a complete argumentative essay, teachers can assign to individual students or a class any of five levels of support. At the least-challenging end of the range, sentences within the text evidence are highlighted and the students simply need to select the sentence that best supports their argument. At the more difficult end, students are provided the topic sentence for a paragraph and the full-text evidence from which to take notes to write the rest of the paragraph on their own.

Regardless of the level of support, all students begin their sessions by reading various texts about specific civics topics and are then asked to match claims about the reading with evidence that supports the argument (the site tracks how many attempts a student needs to correctly assign pertinent evidence to their claims). Once students have established their arguments and evidence, they begin to develop their essays. A helpful bar tracks progress as students write an introduction, multiple claims (or evidence to support their argument), a counter paragraph, and a conclusion paragraph. Though student development of the argumentative essay is largely linear on Drafting Board—students must complete earlier segments before later segments are attempted—they can return later to earlier paragraphs and make revisions.

After adding evidence to support the main thrust of each paragraph, students are prompted to add transitional sentences that improve the flow of the paragraph (a thorough list is supplied of possible transitions and their definitions and examples).

Beyond the specifics of argumentative topics, Drafting Board embeds several elements that strengthen argumentative writing in general. Most texts have accompanying audio, and the site provides students with pertinent questions like “does your evidence make sense?” when reviewing potential text evidence for the first time. Such elements have global relevance, as they transfer beyond the immediate task to other writing challenges that students will likely face in the future.

In sum, Drafting Board is a distinctive and welcome tool for teaching students how to create an argumentative essay and improve their writing skills, through a civic lens. The next section provides a deeper examination of Drafting Board’s major strengths and weaknesses, as well as summary thoughts on its overall quality.

# ICIVICS DRAFTING BOARD

## PART TWO: ICIVICS DRAFTING BOARD: UNIQUE, USEFUL, BUT NEEDS MORE

By Jonathan S. Budd and Victoria McDougald

As described in part one, [iCivics Drafting Board](#) is an online essay-building tool for teachers seeking to help their pupils learn to write argumentative essays while exposing them to core civics and social-studies content.<sup>39</sup> As with any online resource, however, it has both strengths and shortcomings.

### What are iCivics Drafting Board's Greatest Strengths?

Drafting Board is a unique online resource for improving students' core literacy skills—namely, teaching them how to construct effective argumentative essays that are supported by evidence and reasoning. A major strength is its clear and simple breakdown of the writing process. The site's use of user-friendly “game-like” graphics and instructions helps students at all levels to formulate ideas, organize arguments, and defend conclusions, while making the multistep writing process interactive and approachable (for example, text is supported through a glossary of potentially unfamiliar terms, such as “candidate,” “campaigns,” and “special interest groups”). Such embedded supports may be especially helpful for struggling students who are intimidated by long essays. Differentiating the level of writing support for each student could allow varying pupil needs to be met within the same class.

In addition to strengthening argumentative writing skills, Drafting Board also uniquely requires students to develop argumentative essays on subjects relevant to their lives (such as whether young adults should be given access to credit cards, or the pros and cons of lowering the voting age), in addition to more traditional civics content (such as units on the electoral college and the role of interest groups in America's political process). The seven topics presented on Drafting Board are legitimate civics issues, and each uses appealing graphic images to specifically appeal to adolescents.

On top of these engaging, student-relevant lessons and units, the site includes a suite of supplemental activities and resources to aid teachers in incorporating Drafting Board's lessons into their classrooms. A printable teacher's guide is provided for each unit, containing not just text evidence and guides for each step of the process but also reproducible handouts to guide brainstorming, topic understanding, and peer editing.

Another strength: Because text evidence must be reviewed several times in the process of writing an essay on Drafting Board, students are encouraged to reread as well as to close-read. Embedding counterarguments within the argumentative essay structure is also wise; this skill is

necessary and possible even for middle schoolers, though they often need ongoing support and reinforcement. Because the site does not include an online grading feature, teachers or peers must review and grade student's writing themselves. Allowing students to peer review each other's work could help refine their proofreading, revision, and editing skills while exposing them to diverse examples of argumentative writing.

Several independent evaluations have found that students using the Drafting Board tool wrote **stronger essays than control-group students**, even after controlling for demographic differences.<sup>40</sup> Finally—and critical for educators on tight budgets—iCivics's resources are completely free and publicly available after registering online.

### How Could Drafting Board Be Improved?

One challenge with Drafting Board is the time required to complete one of its sessions. iCivics recommends that each learning unit be completed in a single sitting—a process that can easily take up to two hours. Although developing stamina for the writing process is valuable, young or struggling students may have trouble maintaining focus for that long. And many schools run on schedules where class periods are much shorter than the recommended two hours it takes to finish a Drafting Board lesson.

Another significant weakness is the limited content currently available on Drafting Board. Though iCivics plans to significantly increase its resources in the future, currently only seven argumentative-essay writing lessons are available.

Several other improvements would help the Drafting Board learning experience for students. First, the site could provide students with more information about the difference between mediocre evidence and great evidence (evidence in support of a claim may be judged by Drafting Board to be “not the most effective,” but the site does not explain why). Some explanation of the criteria for effectiveness of evidence would help students internalize criteria for this important writing element and learn to differentiate between evidence that is weak, solid, or strong.

Moreover, the program does not appear to judge the quality or even quantity of students' responses. For the segments that require students to create original sentences, they could progress even if writing very limited text. And although most text has accompanying audio, the voice with the text is not that of an authentic human reader. Because the audio cannot be disabled, there exists the temptation for students to be distracted by the audio even when reading the text silently would suffice. Another issue is that in many writing situations, citation of text evidence is required. At least a nod to the importance of that skill would be valuable. And finally, although state social-studies standards are referenced, the Common Core literacy standards for social studies are not, though they could easily be shown to relate.

### Final Thoughts

Overall, iCivics Drafting Board is interactive, easy to use, engaging, and real-world relevant, although limited in its current offerings. It is also clear about what it intends—and does not intend—to do. For example, it is not designed to assess the quality of student writing. This means that after a student spends potentially two hours on a Drafting Board task, teachers themselves must review that student’s work product and assist with further revisions.

Drafting Board is likely most appropriate for students in grades 6–10, given the fairly regimented linearity of its essay writing and the level of readings supplied as sources. What Drafting Board provides to those students is the structured experience of writing an argumentative essay on a topic of true significance, which requires them to persevere through turns of detail and logic on that essay-writing path. As the students who would most benefit from work on argumentative writing are those most apt to get frustrated by what they see as the repetitive nature of essay development, Drafting Board helps demonstrate that essay development need not be repetitious to be thorough.



# READING AND WRITING TOOLS

# THINKCERCA

## PART ONE: ONE STOP WRITING SHOP

By Tabitha Pacheco

Helping students become effective writers is a challenging task; teaching students to write persuasive argumentative essays can be downright daunting. ThinkCERCA is an English language arts (ELA) curriculum designed to meet the ELA Common Core State Standards, specifically those pertaining to language, listening and speaking, reading, and writing.<sup>41</sup> It is described as a “personalized literacy platform” that emphasizes close reading and writing argumentative essays. For the uninitiated, close reading is defined as follows:

*Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole.<sup>42</sup>*

### ThinkCERCA Overview

ThinkCERCA teaches students to engage in this close-reading process and in academic writing through instruction structured around five areas: making claims, supporting claims with evidence, reasoning, counterarguments, and using audience-appropriate language (in fact, CERCA stands for claim, evidence, reasoning, counter-argument, and audience). Reading and writing lessons span grades three through twelve and integrate content in math, science and social studies. Texts are leveled based on quantitative measurements (such as Lexile levels) and qualitative measures (such as required student background knowledge). Since ten different grade levels of reading are offered, lessons can be personalized to meet a student’s current reading grade level.

For example, an eighth-grade teacher could assign her entire class an argumentative essay on artificial intelligence. Each of her students would be assigned texts customized to his or her reading level based on the results of beginning, midyear, and end-of-year benchmark assessments. One student may be reading a tenth-grade-level passage on advancements in technology while another is reading a fifth-grade-level article on robots. So while students may be reading different texts, they share the same underlying theme, which enables all students to develop arguments on the same topic and facilitates classroom discussion around an issue, rather than on a single book that has been assigned to the class.

There are three ways ThinkCERCA is typically implemented in a classroom or school setting. One is as a writing program to cultivate cross-curricular ties between ELA and history, science, and math. Since close-reading and academic-writing skills are needed in all core subjects, ThinkCERCA can support core teachers by allowing them to search for content-related themes from the vast array of ELA lessons.

A second option for incorporating ThinkCERCA is using it as a supplemental tool to enhance a teacher's existing curriculum. For example, if a class is reading a novel with an underlying theme of personal identity, the teacher could assign additional readings on this theme using ThinkCERCA's voluminous digital library of authentic texts. The teacher could then assign an applied reading and writing assignment (more below), in which students would follow the ThinkCERCA process to produce an argumentative essay.

The third way ThinkCERCA can be used is as a complete ELA curriculum, as the lessons include all of the third to twelfth grade Common Core ELA writing and reading standards. A teacher could follow the provided ThinkCERCA scope and sequence to ensure that all of the standards are taught during the school year. However, ThinkCERCA does not provide any full-length books or novels, so the teacher (or her school or district) would need to provide those (ThinkCERCA uses previously published articles and short passages, up to 75 percent of which are informational in nature).

Whichever method the teacher chooses; the paid premium subscription is a must to access the writing portions of the site. The lessons are organized into three formats: direct instruction, applied reading and writing, and additional reading practice. The lessons each target different areas of learning and are not designed to be completed together, meaning a teacher could utilize the applied reading and writing portion without first using the direct instruction lessons. Let's look at each format in more detail.

There are over eighty direct instruction lessons available with a full subscription to ThinkCERCA. These lessons are used to introduce concepts in the Common Core standards (such as "making arguments about literature" and "writing explanatory texts") in less than ten minutes. Some of the targeted skills covered within these larger concepts include figurative language and connotation, context clues, point of view, and citing and documenting sources. In direct instruction, new concepts are presented using the teaching cycle of modeling, guided practice, and independent practice. Students can listen individually to the lesson, or the teacher can present the lesson to the class as a whole (ideally by projecting the online content onto a smartboard). Every lesson has the option for the text to be read aloud by a human reader (this is an excellent feature because many programs offer computer-generated screen readers but hearing a human voice is far more user friendly). ThinkCERCA recommends teaching lessons to the whole class initially until students understand the program, and then students should be equipped to complete the lessons independently on computers at their own pace (using headphones so they can listen to the audio option).

After introducing key skills and concepts via direct instruction, the material can be reinforced in another lesson type called applied reading and writing. These lessons require students to use close-reading skills and then develop an argument around the text. In my opinion, this is the most powerful aspect of ThinkCERCA, as quality online writing tools are so difficult to come by. The lessons are organized into six steps that are designed to be completed in two forty-five-minute classes or one ninety-minute ELA block. Let's run through the steps.

The lesson starts at Step 1, which is called "connect." The student is provided a prompt to help her form a personal connection to the topic, such as, "Have you, or someone you know, had to make a moral decision?" Step 2 is "read." The student is assigned an authentic text from a credible source (such as a published article in a magazine). She can read it on her own or, as indicated above, use the optional audio support. After the student reads the passage, she answers several multiple-choice questions based on the Common Core reading comprehension standards. After an initial reading, she moves to Step 3, "engage with the text," which is to interact with the text through close reading. This step requires the student to reread the text and complete certain tasks such as highlighting phrases that support the argument. Students can also type notes directly into the text.

The highlighted text and student notes are used to complete Step 4, "summarize." The program requires the student to type a basic summary of the text, which she can refer to as she moves into the final steps of writing. Step 5, "build an argument," walks her through a graphic organizer to start developing an argumentative essay. The graphic organizer includes online index cards for the student to state her claim, cite evidence, explain her reasoning, and devise counterarguments. Built-in sentence starters (or "frames") offer the student fill-in-the-blank sentences to help her find evidence from the text. When a student is ready, she moves to Step 6, "create your CERCA" (or write your formal argument). For this task, the screen is split so the student can see her notes and graphic organizer on one side and type her argument on the other side. The end product is an argumentative essay with claims and evidence based on close reading of authentic texts.

The third lesson format offered by ThinkCERCA is additional reading. These are the only lessons available on the free basic plan. Students engage in close reading and then complete a five-question multiple-choice assessment to gauge comprehension. The ThinkCERCA developers recommend that additional reading lessons be used as independent practice or homework assignments (though assigning them as small-group work is also an option). The reading passages for all lessons are a mix of literary and informational texts. After students review and submit their responses, they are immediately scored and shown the percent correct and incorrect.

Now you know what ThinkCERCA does. In part two, I'll discuss its overall strengths and areas of improvement.

# THINKCERCA

## PART TWO: HIGH-QUALITY HELP FOR TEACHING KIDS HOW TO WRITE, AT A PRICE

By Tabitha Pacheco

All curricula and supplemental tools have their pros and cons, but in the case of [ThinkCERCA](#), there are far more of the former than the latter.<sup>43</sup>

### Advantages

One of the greatest strengths of this tool is the power it gives teachers to customize a student's learning based on her abilities. All students are administered an initial leveling assessment to confirm their reading level (below, at grade, or above grade level). The program then generates custom reading passages for each student, based on his or her abilities, for use in the applied reading and writing tasks. This is a huge help to teachers because it saves them hours of time in administering reading-placement assessments and finding authentic leveled-reading material for each student. In addition to establishing a reading baseline, ThinkCERCA provides students with a baseline writing assessment, too—the results of which can be used to customize the ThinkCERCA rubrics used to grade all written work.

Another advantage of ThinkCERCA is that students can access their accounts to work on their assignments from their home computers. The ThinkCERCA site works on iPads, Chromebooks, desktops, and tablets (though Chrome is the recommended browser). Students can log in from their home computers once they have set up their student account using the classroom code provided by their teacher.

At first glance, logging in to ThinkCERCA can be overwhelming due to the sheer volume of available materials, but there's a helpful "getting started" webinar. This twenty-minute session provides all the information needed to navigate the site and set up your class. The search options are also helpful: teachers can search the site by using the filter options such as lesson type, subject, grade level, standard, and theme. The standard filter is particularly useful, allowing teachers to select the particular Common Core standard that they want to target. If history, science, or math teachers are using ThinkCERCA to incorporate writing into their classrooms, the subject filter may be useful to find reading and writing assignments in their content area. These various search filters work well for finding lessons and assignments. However, if a more specific search is required, the teacher can click the "?" button, which opens another tab linked to the program's support page where keywords can be typed into the search box.

### Areas for Improvement

The biggest disadvantage of ThinkCERCA is its price. At \$40 per student for an annual license, it is quite expensive; plus, for it to be effectively utilized in a classroom, students need their own computers and headphones so that they can work independently (even the reading passages are online). Schools must have the funds not only to purchase the \$40 subscription per student but also for a classroom set of computers and headphones. Although additional reading lessons can be accessed through the free version, a user must pay the license fee to have access to the writing portions of ThinkCERCA. Basic calculations would put a class of twenty-five students at a yearly cost of \$1,000. If a middle school or high school teacher taught five sections, it would cost a pretty penny to implement (roughly \$5,000). Unfortunately, that high cost makes ThinkCERCA a deal breaker for most teachers. A school would have to use this as its core English language arts (ELA) curriculum in order to make it cost effective. To avoid the cost of a classroom set of computers, though, teachers could get creative with their grouping and rotate students on computers.

### Final Thoughts

ThinkCERCA addresses the Common Core State Standards for ELA with cross-curricular ties to texts in mathematics, social studies, and science. I'm impressed with the resources in the premium lessons, and the CERCA writing steps are an excellent tool for teaching argumentative writing. If a teacher works in a school that can offer every student daily access to a computer (and can afford the tool's cost), then the ThinkCERCA premium plan is a terrific option.

Besides use in a traditional brick-and-mortar school, ThinkCERCA would be a fine option for blended or hybrid schools that utilize a combination of face-to-face and online instruction, as the lessons can be completed independently by the student. If a classroom doesn't have the budget to pay \$40 per student to utilize the premium plan, the additional reading lessons (which comprise the entirety of the free version) could be used as independent practice for close reading and reading comprehension. Those lessons could also be used as an activity for students who finish classwork early, as a learning station in classroom rotations, or as homework if the students accessed the ThinkCERCA site from their home computer. The additional reading lessons use credible texts with standards-aligned follow-up comprehension questions.

That said, free online reading tools are a dime a dozen. Free online writing tools, however, are especially difficult to come by and are in demand by teachers. ThinkCERCA unfortunately does not fill that cost-free writing void.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

By Victoria McDougald

One of the Common Core State Standards' (CCSS's) many touted benefits was that shared academic standards would stimulate the development and use of high-quality curricular and instructional resources across state lines. And certainly, since the majority of states adopted the standards six or so years ago, there's been a dramatic rise in new curricular and instructional materials all claiming to be aligned to the shared standards. But is this deluge of instructional resources likely to benefit students if time-strapped teachers aren't able to identify easily the good from the bad? As one of our teacher reviewers remarked, "Every second of a teacher's day is valuable," so it's critical that teachers be able to effectively weed through the vast array of resources available.

Fortunately, as we note in this report's introduction, several organizations (such as EdReports and the Louisiana Department of Education) have begun providing educators with impartial, third-party reviews of the content, quality, and alignment of various textbook programs and other curricular resources. Yet to date, shockingly little information is available about the quality of digital learning tools intended to supplement these full curricula.

This set of reviews was designed to help fill that void. Our reviews identified several common areas of strength and improvement across and within subjects.

In terms of strengths, we found that content across all nine tools largely reflects many of the instructional shifts called for by Common Core, such as including a balance of text types and text-dependent questions and tasks for reading and writing.<sup>44</sup> In addition, many tools, but particularly the writing tools, were designed with a "game-like" feel and are likely to be quite engaging to students, especially the youngest learners. Our reviewers also stressed that online writing tools in particular (such as Quill's grammar, vocabulary, and writing exercises) make it significantly easier for teachers to customize activities and assignments to match each student's current ability and learning level.

For reading, the rise of text sets, such as those available online from Newsela, Readworks, and Achieve the Core, is a particularly innovative development. As we describe earlier, text sets are customized (and customizable) collections of texts tightly focus on a similar topic, theme, or standard. These sets are intentionally sequenced and designed to build students' background knowledge, vocabulary, and overall reading comprehension. One challenge in accessing these promising resources is that there simply aren't enough of them. (And if they exist, they are often difficult to locate within broader sites.)

High-quality text sets are difficult and time-consuming for teachers to develop on their own, and sites that currently offer them don't often have many to choose from. Perhaps this explains why so many teachers are still unfamiliar with this instructional approach.

Finally, the majority of online reading and writing tools included in this report provided helpful student assessments and/or data reporting capabilities for teachers, which can save educators huge amounts of time grading student writing or in-class activities. This time-saver was greatly appreciated by our reviewers.

In terms of shared areas for improvement, usability is a concern across products. For example, while some sites, such as Lexia Reading Core5, provide a wealth of information and instructions for teachers and have excellent search functions, others, such as Newsela and Readworks, lack recommendations for incorporating text set resources into broader class activities. Several other tools would be greatly strengthened by improving their search functions for locating specific resources (for example, by topic, grade, ability level, or specific Common Core standard).

In addition, while several of the tools allow teachers to customize lessons by individual student ability level, many lack information regarding accessibility and accommodations for students with learning disabilities. And unfortunately, free, high-quality online writing tools are still very hard to come by, and some of the more comprehensive reading sites, such as Lexia Reading Core5, are not free and are most likely cost-prohibitive for many educators.

The good news is that the availability of ELA resources appears to have improved since Common Core's arrival (and the rise of low- or no-cost online educational resources in recent years has been particularly dramatic). Yet what matters most in the end is whether these instructional resources actually improve student learning. And while a handful of studies are now beginning to explore curriculum effectiveness, far less is known about the effectiveness of instructional tools intended to supplement a full curriculum.<sup>45</sup> Much more work on both of these fronts is needed if we hope to see large gains for all students as a result of using these products.



## ENDNOTES

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