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Primary Sources: At the Heart of the Common Core State Standards

By Rich Cairn

What are the Common Core State Standards?

[The Common Core State Standards \(CCSS\)](#) outline grade-by-grade goals for all K-12 students—goals that are attuned to the advanced literacy skills needed for college, career and citizenship. The CCSS communicate a common understanding of what students should know and be able to do by their high school graduation. The standards are the result of a state-led initiative overseen by organizations of the nation’s governors and state education commissioners. Nearly all states and the District of Columbia have adopted the CCSS.

What role do primary sources play in meeting the standards?

Primary sources are integral to helping students achieve the CCSS. The standards require students to digest and apply information using discipline-specific skills, such as analysis, comparing sources, persuasive writing, and research. Students generate questions, take and organize notes, find, analyze, and cite sources. Additionally, learning new content vocabulary is essential, as is the ability to compare historical interpretations and form hypotheses. Note that literacy skills embedded in the CCSS include oral communication. Presentations provide vital opportunities for students to listen and speak.

Under the English Language Arts standards, students beginning in the earliest grades must substantiate written arguments with evidence. Students also learn to *“gain, evaluate, and present increasingly complex information, ideas, and evidence through listening and speaking as well as media.”*

The Common Core approaches science and social studies with a particular emphasis on literacy. This has several implications for teaching with primary sources. The CCSS greatly increase the focus on informational text at all grades. Assessment designers explicitly recommend a 50-50 split between literature and informational texts, starting at the primary grades. Students must be able to use subject-specific concepts and particular academic vocabulary in context.

Through the grades, students increasingly shift to writing explanation, argument, and analysis. Students’ capacity to source, organize, analyze, cite, discuss, and write about information gained from both primary and secondary sources is paramount.

Primary sources provide authentic materials for students to practice the skills required by the CCSS. Encouraging students to grapple with the raw materials of history, such as photographs, newspapers, film, audio files, government documents, and economic data, provides opportunities for them to practice critical thinking, analysis skills and inquiry.

What does using primary sources to achieve the CCSS look like in practice?

Teachers across grade levels and disciplines may wonder how to use primary sources to help students meet the CCSS. The following examples illustrate ways to address specific

standards using primary sources from the Library of Congress.

Elementary Level

While students in lower grades may not yet be proficient readers, the CCSS require them to demonstrate the ability to formulate ideas based on their analysis of texts. For example, the Reading Standards for Informational Text K-5 under English Language Arts require Grade 2 students to *“Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text.”*

Primary sources in formats such as photographs, maps and sound recordings can help meet this requirement by providing rich learning opportunities for early readers.

For example, as part of a unit focusing on transportation, images relating to the development of the car could help students observe technological advances from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present. For instance, they might analyze photographs, including a [horse and buggy](#); [a very early automobile](#); [a Ford Model T](#); and [a car from the 1950s](#). Students might compare car designs from the past to those of today, and speculate about the cultural shifts that led to, or resulted from, this evolving form of personal transportation.

By Grade 4, students are required to explain cause and effect using evidence identified in informational text. To address this standard, a teacher might select primary sources from [The Dust Bowl Migrations Primary Source Set](#). Analyzing items from this set, which includes a map, photographs and song lyrics, will allow students to investigate the environmental disaster that triggered the largest migration in U.S. history.

Grade 5 students are required to, *“Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and difference in the point of view they represent,”* under the English Language Arts standards. Teachers could select items from another primary source set, such as [Women’s Suffrage](#), to help students understand how people expressed different viewpoints through political cartoons, physical protests and publications, for example.

Secondary Level

At grades 6-12, the CCSS provide distinct literacy standards for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Many of these discipline-specific standards implicitly include primary sources among essential types of evidence; some refer specifically to primary sources.

For example, Grades 6-8 students must *“Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources,”* to meet Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Standard 1. Students studying the Civil Rights Movement could read and cite evidence from a letter, such as [Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine](#), which describes the treatment of African-American students who integrated their local high school. Students can also explore and cite evidence from additional primary sources featured in the Library’s online exhibition, [“With an Even Hand”: Brown v. Board at Fifty](#). The object list includes images and documents, including legal correspondence relating to the case.

Grades 11-12 students need to *“Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.”* To meet this reading standard, students might examine the rhetorical construction of a key speech such as [Theodore Roosevelt’s second inaugural address](#). Students can also learn from analyzing drafts of famous literary works, for example, the poems [“The Ballad of Booker T.”](#), by Langston Hughes and [“O Captain, My Captain,”](#) by Walt Whitman.

A collection of manuscripts, such as [The Thomas Jefferson Papers](#), could provide a varied yet manageable pool of sources that students could mine to inform an explanatory essay on the drafting of the Declaration of Independence.

The Common Core State Standards also call for skills with numerical, digital, and multi-media sources. Under Reading Standards for Grades 11-12, students, *“Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., quantitative data, video, multimedia) in order to address a question or solve a problem.”* A nearly identical standard is in history/social studies.

For example, for a unit on Immigration, students could analyze historical tables, charts and maps, such as those on [page eight](#) of a [statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census](#). They can observe data trends going back to 1790 and compare this data to more recent U.S. census data. Students investigating a larger question, such as “How did Americans at the turn of the last century react to large numbers of new immigrants?” might analyze a leaflet from the Immigration Restriction League along with a 1916 sound recording of a popular song, “Don’t Bite the Hand That’s Feeding You,” for examples of expressed anti-immigrant sentiment. These and other primary sources in a range of formats are available in the Library’s [immigration-themed primary source set](#).

Conclusion

Primary sources can provide the raw materials teachers need to support student achievement in the CCSS. Primary source-based learning is at the heart of the standards. Using photographs, maps, manuscripts, and other primary sources to engage students in learning and building critical thinking and constructing knowledge will help prepare students for success in school and beyond.

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