



Blog

Myths and Truths: Is Common Core Trying to Do Away with English?

March 19, 2015 by **Timothy Shanahan**

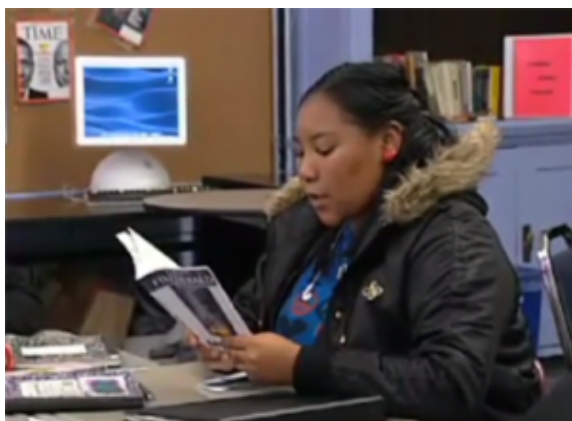
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It often feels like two new Common Core myths appear for every one we debunk. In my last blog entry in this space I challenged some widespread myths about the Common Core and frustration in reading. Here I want to continue on the seemingly quixotic quest of clarifying the truth about new standards.

English teachers are no longer required to teach literature?

You know you're dealing with a hot issue when it comes under fire from talk radio pundits and Internet memes. You may have seen the outcry about Common Core shifts from classic literature toward the reading of informational texts. Scary, huh?



There are many voices coming out of the woodwork to defend "endangered" English departments, claiming that the new standards will require that English teachers teach students to read government handbooks in place of short stories and poetry. Their concern is that dropping literature from the curriculum will undermine students' love of reading and their development of empathy. Their alarm might be real, but it is totally without foundation. Even under Common Core, English teachers are still expected to teach Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Shakespeare, and kids will still read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye* in America's classrooms.

The Common Core State Standards do, however, raise an important point that should not be lost in the flummery. It is not enough that students be able to read stories, novels, and poems; they also must be able to successfully lock horns with essays, editorials, histories, and science experiments. Our kids' civic and economic futures depend upon their ability to read and understand those kinds of texts, and schools are responsible for developing those abilities.

This is why the Common Core requires teachers to teach kids to read both informational and literary texts. And the standards say that literature should make up half the reading in elementary grades and 30% in secondary grades. It's at this point that the mythmakers distort very reasonable recommendations. Their arguments against the standards rest on the assumption that the 50/50 and 30/70 split is all required to happen in English classes. Not true.

On page 5 of *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, it explicitly states that literature/informational division is for the whole school

day. In most high schools, English language arts class makes up only about 15% of the school day. Kids are going to have to read a lot of literature in those classes if it is going to be almost a third of their reading. It also means that the standards are supporting the reading of science texts in science classes, math texts in math classes, and history/civics texts in social studies classes.

So are English teachers supposed to teach science and history now?

Related to the confusion about the literature/information split, this myth is out there because of honest misunderstandings of the "Literacy Standards for Social Studies/History and Science and Technical Subjects" aspect of the standards' name. I've even seen this myth operating in at least some schools and organizations as Common Core implementation marches on. Let me assure you, English teachers are still supposed to teach literature. And they are definitely not the ones to teach the literacy of other school subjects.

Research shows that each discipline creates, communicates, and evaluates knowledge in relatively unique or specialized ways.¹ Historians look for a consistency in the historical record across documents and other primary sources.

Scientists, on the other hand, conduct experiments and replicate the experiments conducted by others. That means scientists can be satisfied with a single text that describes research so explicitly that it can be replicated, while historians are much more concerned about issues like who wrote this document, when, what other evidence have they provided, and so on.

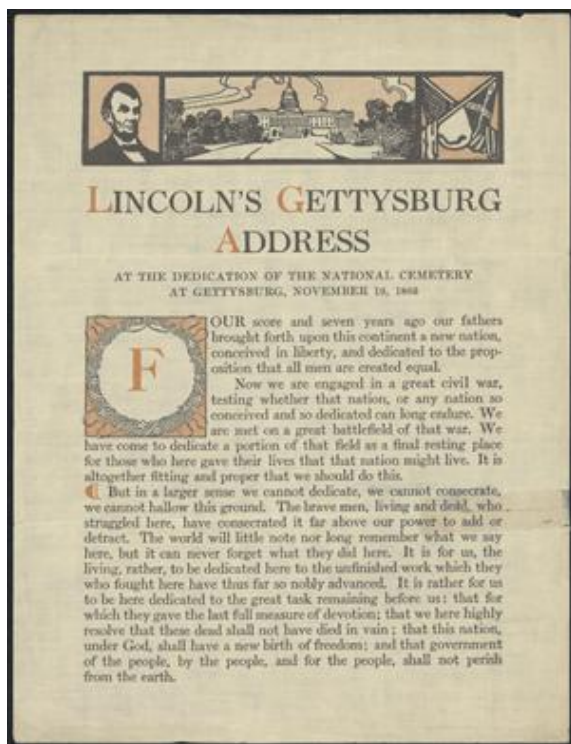
The Common Core acknowledges these differences and asks that secondary students be taught to read like literary critics, but also like historians and scientists and mathematicians. Few English teachers have the knowledge, training, interest, or proclivity to take on in-depth instruction of science, math, or history texts. No one in his or her right mind should expect high school English teachers or reading teachers to be the main source of such instruction. These particular standards do not belong to the high school English Department, but to the school (or, perhaps most accurately, to the students themselves). It would be best if teachers in those fields taught kids how to read and write in those subjects; sharing with them the cognitive secrets of their fields of study.

While English teachers are responsible for teaching literature, they also have responsibilities to address rhetoric and what we have long referred to as "literary nonfiction," which includes criticism, essays, and journalistic writing. For instance, some groups have promoted lessons for teaching historical texts like "The Gettysburg Address" and "Letter from Birmingham Jail" from a literary standpoint.

It is not unreasonable for an English teacher to teach these documents because Lincoln and King's rhetorical art were outstanding and deserving of study. However, despite such lessons offering masterful structures in which to analyze authors' diction, they do very little to explain why these documents were written or what impact they had. Reading these texts like a historian will definitely bear fruit, but it needs to happen with the guidance of a teacher of history rather than a teacher of English.

It should be evident from all of this that the Common Core is not trying to destroy English departments or to do away with literature. These standards are championing the idea of teaching students to read in a variety of ways that are consistent with each discipline.





English teachers need to continue to teach literature and literary nonfiction, and teachers in the other disciplines need to teach the specialized uses of reading in their fields of study.

Some Teacher Takeaways

- English teachers need to continue teaching literature in their classrooms. They should devote substantial amounts of time to having students read high-quality classical and contemporary literature.
- English teachers also should devote some time to teaching students to read literary nonfiction. This teaching should focus heavily on things like word choices, organization, and the effectiveness of the rhetoric. Not all essays, speeches, historical documents, or journalistic pieces merit this kind of attention, so it is important that the focus be on those that have literary value.
- Teachers across the curriculum need to teach their students how to read history, science, and other technical texts in ways that are appropriate to each discipline. Thus, a science teacher shouldn't be trying to teach basic reading skills, but skills that are

specific to and valuable in science (like comparing a table or formula with a prose explanation of some phenomenon).

1 Shanahan, T., & Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Education Review*, 78(1), 40–59.

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Tim's entertaining blog, www.shanahanonliteracy.com, provides cutting-edge information on literacy teaching.

For more from Tim, read his [other posts](#) or view his [video](#) on research-based practices for K-3 reading comprehension, based on the [Practice Guide on reading comprehension](#) he chaired.



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