



Blog

The Truth Behind Common Core's "Required Readings"

October 16, 2015 by **Timothy Shanahan**

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"I thought our school had a strong reading program, but it doesn't include all the required Common Core reading selections. Do we have to find a whole new program?"

"What do we need to look for in reading programs other than the required Common Core texts?"

I've been asked questions like these all too often. My response always begins by clearing up the underlying misunderstanding. The Common Core State Standards *do not* require or recommend specific readings. Decisions concerning what texts to teach are left entirely to the states and local school districts.



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR
**English Language Arts
 &
 Literacy in
 History/Social Studies,
 Science, and Technical Subjects**
 Appendix B: Text Exemplars and
 Sample Performance Tasks

What seems to be confusing to so many as they review the Standards is [Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks](#). It's this document that provides examples of high-quality texts. However, as educators review these examples, some are losing sight of the framework in which they are presented. The introduction to Appendix B explains:

"The following text samples primarily serve to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are suggestive of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. *They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list.*"

Despite this "express" rejection of the Standards including any kind of mandatory or recommended reading list, many observers continue to assume otherwise. One curriculum director even sidled up to me early on and confided, *sotto voce*, "We know that these are the books that are required." You can imagine my surprise at this secret since I'd helped write the Standards.

When one looks at the Common Core controversies that have swept much of the country, certainly one of the hottest has to do with the content of certain example texts. While *Appendix B* includes Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in its grade 11 examples, many teachers and parents may consider its subjects (e.g., sexual assault) too sensitive for some students or classes. There are certainly literary and First Amendment arguments to weigh in the face of such objections, but no English teacher should feel pressured to teach the book "because the Common Core says so." It doesn't.

So what makes the best reading program for your school and students?

Without knowing more details about your specific situation, I can't answer that with confidence. However, I would not automatically select one whose publisher held strictly to the contents of *Appendix B*. Lack of imagination is rarely a good selling point.

I would look to see whether the texts that students were asked to read were meaty, diverse, and of high quality. Don't get tripped up by specific titles. Evaluate the quality of the curriculum materials and the needs of students. Focus on whether the reading sequence is likely to build students' knowledge and ability to handle increasingly complex text.

Go beyond the CCSS Exemplars, selecting other high-quality contemporary and classical texts. Librarians and publishing companies can be a great resource for finding high-quality literature and informational text.

If you want to try to make great selections on your own, here are some resources worth turning to:

- **Cooperative Children's Book Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison** identifies high-quality books in lots of categories, including texts appropriate to Common Core.
- **The New York Public Library** recommends the best 100 children's books of the last century.
- **Children's Choices, International Literacy Association** offers list of contemporary reading selections based on children's opinions.
- **Teaching American History.Org** connects users to the full text of 50 foundational American history documents



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