

The Importance of Evidence in the Common Core

By Diane Fettrow

We are all quite familiar with television crime dramas that call for the police to gather enough evidence to catch and convict the perpetrator(s). Just as there can be no case without evidence in such law and order shows, so too evidence plays an equally important role in the Common Core State Standards.

What exactly is evidence? Most of us would agree to a definition something like this: evidence can be information or facts that indicate whether or not a belief or statement is valid or true. We are all bombarded by information daily, and sometimes we accept the truth of that information without any proof. The Common Core State Standards have a remedy for such mistaken thinking: the requirement to provide evidence in reading, writing, speaking and listening. All such evidence necessitates paying close attention to the clues in a text; sometimes the evidence is explicit and other times the student must make a logical inference. The teacher has a duty to press students for evidence to justify their responses, whether the responses are oral or written. Every day in the classroom, the teacher and students should get used to hearing as well as saying comments such as “Prove it,” or “What’s your evidence?”

The concept of evidence permeates the Common Core State Standards. As a matter of fact, we can find 135 occurrences of the word *evidence* in the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* document. Thus, the concept of evidence is second only to that of *text complexity* in understanding the Standards. An early reference to evidence in the Standards appears in the very first College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it: cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions from the text.” That standard means that teachers need to demand of students the source of their ideas by referring to particular lines of text as the basis for their thinking. If the text is a visual or multimedia one, then the students must be taught to “read” non-print texts, comprehend meaning, make assertions, and cite appropriate evidence for their ideas. Reading Standard 1 impacts almost all of the other Reading Standards (2–9) at every grade level as well as several writing standards and speaking and listening standards.



Diane Fettrow

Author of Pearson Common Core Literature

Diane Fettrow spent the majority of her teaching career in Broward County, Florida, teaching high school English courses and serving as department chair. She also worked as an adjunct instructor at Broward College, Nova Southeastern University, and Florida Atlantic University. After she left the classroom, she served as Secondary Language Arts Curriculum Supervisor for several years, working with more than 50 of the district’s high schools, centers, and charter schools. During her time as curriculum supervisor, she served on numerous local and state committees; she also served as Florida’s K–12 ELA content representative to the PARCC Model Content Frameworks Rapid Response Feedback Group and the PARCC K–12 and Upper Education Engagement Group. Currently she presents workshops on the Common Core State Standards and is working with Pearson on aligning materials to the CCSS. She is an author of *Pearson Common Core Literature*.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative has made it very clear that students need to build more knowledge; one way to build this knowledge is by incorporating many more texts in content areas such as social studies and science so that for elementary school students at least fifty percent of their texts fall outside the narrative story genre. By high school, during a school day students should be reading at least seventy percent informational texts. Teachers must ask students, regardless of grade level, text-dependent questions so that students not only comprehend the texts but also acquire more knowledge. This knowledge can be demonstrated and verified when the student uses evidence from a text to answer a question, write a paper, or make a presentation to a group.

The PARCC Model Content Frameworks call for students to write effectively when using and/or analyzing sources. This skill “requires students to demonstrate the interrelated literacy skills of reading carefully and closely; gathering evidence to support an explanation, summary, claim or comparison about what is read; and analyzing, integrating, and presenting the supporting evidence in writing.” This means, of course, that students must be taught how to cite sources and how to integrate evidence through quotations, paraphrases, and summaries. A student also must be taught to judge the strength of his evidence to support the stance he has taken on a topic or to determine if the evidence supports any other interpretations. Even on the testing consortium assessments the students will be asked to incorporate text-based evidence when they write narrative, literary analysis, and synthesis of informational texts in their constructed response items.

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One important writing genre stressed by the Common Core State Standards is argument. Beginning in Grade 1 when students write opinion pieces, they must supply reasons for their opinions. By high school the demands of writing argumentation are quite sophisticated. Not only must they use evidence in their written arguments, but they must also be able to establish the relationships among the claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence. Students must supply evidence that points out the strengths as well as the weaknesses of claims and counterclaims fairly.

Being able to write about their research is also important. Three of the 10 Writing Standards deal with research. Anchor Writing Standard 9 has students draw “evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.” As early as Grade 3 students are required to sort evidence when they conduct research.

By high school when the students conduct research, they must assess whether the reasoning is valid and whether the evidence is relevant and sufficient by identifying false statements and fallacious reasoning.

Anchor Reading Standard 10 calls for students to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. This particular standard guides all of the choices of texts at each grade level. Students will be expected to do close reading of text and then to compare and contrast a text with previous texts, if appropriate. The assessments will require students to read multiple texts in a set, comprehend each completely, and then synthesize ideas across texts. Most of the selected-response (multiple-choice) assessment items that will be used to determine students’ reading scores will also require the student to show the textual basis of his

choice of answers. In fact, a student may not receive any credit for an answer unless he can show the evidence that proves his answer was correct. Even vocabulary items will require students to show the proof of how they determined the definition of a word by citing the lines of text that provided the context clues.

The Speaking and Listening Standards call for students to participate in a variety of conversations and collaborations with partners, in small groups, and as part of a whole class. According to Speaking Anchor Standard 4, When students speak, they must “present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” Listening Anchor Standard 3 requires students to “evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.” No longer will students be able to be passive listeners when classmates give answers or presentations. Each student who presents must be cognizant that classmates will want to know how he came to his ideas or reached his conclusions. He must be able to prove his points from the text. So too, students who are listening to classmates will need to comprehend text and examine the presenter’s use of evidence. Is it valid? Are other interpretations possible? Thus, students can learn how to be active listeners who politely challenge a speaker’s conclusions when they interpret the same texts in other ways. Listener and speaker must both go to the text to prove a point. Such dialogue is the ultimate use of evidence and reaching logical conclusions.

As teachers plan daily lessons, they should always keep in mind the need for students to cite evidence, regardless of the learning activity. In class, teachers must remember to keep the students always focused on texts with the goal that they will comprehend, make inferences, and see relationships with other texts. In each phase of instruction, students should be expected to cite their proof—to identify where in the text the evidence that supports their ideas is stated or implied.

References

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