

Common Core Standard Redundancy and Lack of Specificity

In many districts, the standards and benchmarks under which the district operates must be adapted from documents provided by the state or some other, external agency. In such cases, it becomes important for districts to assess the adopted material for redundancy, adequate specificity, logical sequencing of skills, and gaps so that they may insure appropriate spiraling of learnings through the grade levels and maximize student achievement. Adopting state standards without vetting them first can perpetuate inadequacies in the curriculum and leave the door open to multiple interpretations of the curriculum as teachers try to decide what mastery of any given standard might look like.

Exhibit 1 and 2 are intended to provide examples both of appropriate spiraling of the curriculum and redundancy of the standards within Common Core State Standards for Language Arts.

Exhibit 1
Appropriate Spiraling of Learning
Common Core State Standards – Language Arts
ORANGE TREE School District
April 2017

Grade Level	Standard	Description
K	RL.K.3	With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.
1	RL.1.3	Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
2	RL.2.3	Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges
3	RL.3.3	Describe characters in a story (e.g. their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

From Exhibit 1, the following should be noted:

- The learning here is clearly spiraled from one grade to the next. The kindergarten standard employs the injunction to “identify characters, settings and major events” which marks it explicitly as an introductory standard, as does the qualifying statement that they do these things “with prompting and support”.
- First, second and third grade all build upon the introduction in Kindergarten: they must describe what they’ve learned to identify, then they must extend that to describe how those elements interact with each other. Finally, they must describe how the characters and their actions drive the story.
- Standards written with this level of specificity make it easy for teachers to decide what to teach and how to teach and to determine what mastery of the standard looks like.

Exhibit 2
Standard Redundancy and Lack of Specificity
Common Core State Standards – Language Arts
ORANGE TREE School District
April 2017

Grade Level	Standard	Description
3	W.3.3	<p>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. b. Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations. c. Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order. <p>Provide a sense of closure.</p>
4	W.4.3	<p>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. b. Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations. c. Use a variety of transitional words and phrases to manage the sequence of events. d. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely. <p>Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.</p>
5	W.4.3	<p>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Orient the reader by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. b. Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, and pacing to develop experiences and events or show the responses of characters to situations. c. Use a variety of transitional words, phrases, and clauses to manage the sequence of events. d. Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely. <p>Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.</p>

Grade Level	Standard	Description
6	W.6.3	<p>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured events sequences.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically. b. Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, and description to develop experiences, events and/or characters. c. Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another. d. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events. e. Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.

From Exhibit 2, the following may be noted:

- The basic objective of the standard is identical from grade level to grade level. The only difference between grades 3, 4, and 5 and grade 6 is the small change in the wording from “clear event sequences” to “well-structured event sequences.” From a teaching standpoint, this distinction would be hard to quantify or to assess. Without clear examples, a teacher would have to navigate this standard by “feel;” this leaves the door open for multiple interpretations, some of which may not conform to district expectations or align to district assessments.
- Sub point (a) does not differ materially from grade level to grade level. From a functional standpoint, there is no difference between “establish a situation” and “orient the reader by establishing a situation.” The intent and outcome of both are identical. Sixth grade requires the student to “engage” the reader, which could represent an extension or refinement of skill, but it is not specific enough to clarify how the student is to accomplish this engagement, nor how it will be assessed to determine mastery.
- Sub Point (b) is virtually identical from grade level to grade level. The only difference in the upper grades is the addition of the word “pacing,” but how pacing is to manifest itself in the writing is not specifically addressed. In the absence of specific guidelines, a teacher may guess wrongly, or teachers across schools may interpret differently, what mastery of this should look like.
- Sub point (c) shows some specificity from grade 3 to grade 4, where students move from “temporal words and phrases” to “a variety of transitional words,” but after that, the learning is functionally identical from grade level to grade level. Transitions are one of the most complex writing skills for students to master, so additional specificity here would be highly desirable. When are transitions used? What should they accomplish? How should the mandate of the writing assignment change so that greater complexity which would require the use of transitions is evident? What, in the end, will mastery of this look like?
- Sub point (d) [not included in grade 3] is also functionally the same from grade level to grade level. In every case it requires sensory detail and concrete words to convey events. Only in grade 6 does the student also have to make sure s/he uses “relevant descriptive detail;” however, sensory details and concrete words are also forms of descriptive detail, so the material distinction here is lost.

- All grade levels require the student to provide a conclusion. In grade 3, students must merely “provide a sense of closure,” while in grades 4, 5, and 6 they must “provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.” The standard is identical in grades 4-6. Conclusion, like transitions, is a more complex writing skill which often takes years to learn well, so greater specificity here to indicate the increasing complexity of this demand as students move up the grades would be of great assistance to teachers. Otherwise, they will have to guess what mastery of this part of the standard looks like.

This sort of redundancy, where a standard is repeated from grade level to grade level without enough detail to distinguish between grades makes it challenging for teachers to determine what specific skills they need to teach and how students need to demonstrate those specific skills to ensure their success on current and future tests., and how the learning is going to be mastered. It also creates a problem when calibrating student work artifacts. Because of the repetitive nature of the standard, a work artifact from grade 6 could easily calibrate to grade 4 or lower. Auditors found that the Common Core State Standards often do not provide enough specificity with regard to discrete grade level objectives to ensure that mastery of the standards is clearly understood.