



**A Review of Tennessee's Draft
English Language Arts Academic
Standards**

November 2015

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Review of Tennessee’s Draft English Language Arts Standards

This report provides a review of the draft of the Tennessee English Language Arts Standards (TES) released in October 2015 to determine whether they are high-quality standards that prepare students, over the course of their K–12 education careers, for success in credit-bearing college courses and quality, high-growth jobs. To complete this review, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) partnered with Achieve, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability. The organization, created in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders, is one of the nation’s leading sources for expertise on K-12 academic standards.

When evaluating standards, Achieve has historically used six criteria: rigor, focus, coherence, specificity, clarity/accessibility, and measurability. For the purposes of this analysis, the draft 2016 TES were analyzed with respect to these criteria.¹

Rigor

Rigor is the quintessential hallmark of exemplary standards. It is the measure of how closely a set of standards represents the content and cognitive demand necessary for students to succeed in credit-bearing college courses without remediation and in entry-level, quality, high-growth jobs. **It appears that Tennessee has been exacting in its examination of the level of demand in its draft 2016 TES, drawing on the best of the college- and career-ready standards and research.** The new draft TES draw upon the best of Tennessee’s current state standards (TSS). The following are the results of analyzing the TES against these measures.

The TES provide solid grounding in drawing evidence from texts.

Surveys of employers and college faculty cite the ability to extract details from texts and draw accurate conclusions in writing using evidence as key to success in college and the workplace.² As the ability to find and use evidence to support claims is a hallmark of strong readers and writers, college- and career- ready standards need to call on students to answer text-dependent questions that demonstrate their ability to closely read a text. This measure places a premium on students being able to not only explicitly find what is stated but also make valid claims that reflect available evidence when writing to sources.

¹ Descriptions for these criteria appear in the appendix.

² 2009 ACT National Curriculum Survey; Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002; and the American Diploma Project. (2004). *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*.

Draft standards identify relevant textual evidence while reading throughout the standards for each grade (sometimes in the earlier grades stated as “referring to details and examples” in text to draw inferences and to back up and justify answers), which is a strength of the reading standards. The “evidence” standard progresses in rigor and challenge throughout the grades.

The draft writing standards also call for the use of evidence in writing. Students are asked to develop an informational essay, an opinion, or an argument with reasons that are supported by facts and details. This is supplemented with writing standards in grades 3–12 that call specifically for students to draw on evidence from texts to support their analyses, reflections, and research.

The TES lack specificity with regard to the complexity levels of text (despite a series of standards that refer to reading at particular text complexity grade bands).

Research makes clear that the complexity levels of the texts students are presently required to read are significantly below what is required to achieve college and career readiness.³ Rather than focusing solely on the skills of reading and writing, standards need to build a staircase of text complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school.

At each grade level, draft TES refer to students reading text that is within an appropriate span of complexity. What qualifies as grades 2–3, 4–5, 6–8, and 11–12 bands of complexity, however, is undefined. Tennessee needs to provide greater guidance for educators regarding text complexity. The state could choose a number of different approaches to address this need. Tennessee could define grade-level complexity using a reading list, example texts listed in the standards, and/or a quantitative rubric of some kind to guide educators and students in selecting works of appropriate complexity to meet the standards. Since Tennessee calls for “a range of text sophistication corresponding to grade spans within the standards,” the most logical fix is to define the quantitative levels of each span.

There is an additional issue around complexity for Tennessee to consider. The TES routinely call for students to read *only* at the “high end” of two- and three-year bands despite the grade level. In both grades 4 and 5, therefore, students are to read *only* at the high end of the band. Likewise, in grades 6, 7, and 8, students are to read *only* at the high end of the band. The standards do differentiate lower and higher grades by adding the phrases “with scaffolding” or “independently,” but students should be reading in the full range of the band and doing so independently at the lower and middle ends of the range in grades 4, 6, 7, etc.

³ACT, Inc. (2006). *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.

Draft standards are dedicated to vocabulary; however, in grades K–5 there are notable gaps, namely a lack a focus on the acquisition of academic vocabulary, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning.

Closely related to text complexity — and inextricably connected to reading comprehension by nearly a century of research — is the need to focus on building students’ academic vocabulary (words that appear in texts in a variety of content areas). The TES include several standards on vocabulary in grades 6–12, signaling its importance. These expectations address the connotation and denotation of words, along with the impact of word choice on meaning and tone, roots and affixes, word relationships, the meaning of words in context, and knowledge of academic vocabulary. In grades K–5, the focus on vocabulary is principally centered on a single standard that calls for determining the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in texts, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings and roots and affixes, but there is not a focus on acquiring and using vocabulary, particularly academic vocabulary. The elementary years are a crucial time for students to build up a large store of vocabulary words. A strong vocabulary is key to students understanding what they hear and read in school as well as communicating successfully with others. Children who acquire a substantial vocabulary are able to think more deeply, express themselves more clearly, and learn new things more quickly. Tennessee should include standards that relate to the acquisition of academic vocabulary. Indeed, vocabulary acquisition should be overweighted in grades K–5.

The TES place emphasis on reading content-rich informational text and include clear requirements around conducting research.

Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content. Part of the motivation for supporting an interdisciplinary approach to literacy is the extensive research establishing the need for college- and career-ready students to be proficient in reading and learning from complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. Fulfilling this mandate requires that English language arts (ELA) teachers also place greater attention on a specific category of informational text — literary nonfiction — that has been historically neglected in many classrooms. The elementary years are key for students to grow their knowledge about the world. Research shows that the connection between informational text, content knowledge, and reading comprehension is crucial but that the dominance of narrative and fictional text in the elementary curriculum has lessened the growth of knowledge necessary for building students’ reading comprehension skills.⁴

The current draft divides reading standards into two sections: literature and informational text. This division clearly communicates the expectation that, in addition to reading and studying literature, students should read and study informational texts. The standards are thoughtful about which skills and abilities in reading are genre-specific and which hold true across genres to purposefully get at how successful readers approach these different types of texts.

⁴ Neuman, S. B. (2006). “How We Neglect Knowledge — and Why.” *American Educator*, 30(1), 24.

Several draft TES address research, indicating its importance to the field. The TES ask students to develop questions, find information about a specific topic, evaluate sources for relevancy, integrate findings, and cite sources appropriately. These are important elements in an effective research process and product. In grades 6–8, the Tennessee research standards lack the specific focus on short as well as sustained research projects. This focus is evident in other college- and career-ready standards, such as the TSS (and Tennessee’s current standards). (In grades 9–12 and elementary grades, short research projects are highlighted.) Requiring several short research projects enables students to repeat the research process many times in a year in order to develop the expertise needed to conduct research independently. A progression of shorter research projects also encourages students to develop expertise in one area by confronting and analyzing different aspects of the same topic. An ongoing focus on research throughout the year also reinforces attention on writing to sources, which is evident in benchmark college- and career-ready standards.

Focus

High-quality standards establish priorities about the concepts and skills that students should acquire by the time they graduate from high school. Choices should be based on the knowledge and skills essential for students to succeed in postsecondary education and the world of work. A sharpened focus also helps ensure that the cumulative knowledge and skills students are expected to learn — and teachers are expected to teach — are manageable. The following are the results of analyzing the TES against this criterion.

The draft TES reflect a commitment to integrating findings from college- and career-ready research.

Draft standards reflect an appropriate balance between literature and other important areas, such as informational text, evidence, crafting arguments, language study, and oral and written communications.

The TES include requirements that pertain to handwriting that are not included in the TSS.

Draft standards include handwriting from kindergarten through grade 5, requiring students to print letters in kindergarten and expecting cursive in grades 2–5. The TSS include only a printing standard at kindergarten and grade 1 (print all uppercase and lowercase letters) and do not address cursive in any grade. Including a standard focused on cursive writing acknowledges a recent debate concerning the teaching of handwriting. It may be the case that some young students are unable to read and write cursive writing, a potential handicap to achieving access to a major form of communication.

Coherence

The way in which a state’s college- and career-ready standards are categorized and broken out into supporting strands should reflect a coherent structure of the discipline and/or reveal significant relationships among the strands and how the study of one complements the study of another. If

college- and career-ready standards suggest a progression, that progression should be meaningful and appropriate across the grades or grade spans. The following are the results of analyzing the TES against this criterion.

The draft 2016 TES reflect a meaningful structure for the discipline.

The draft 2016 TES present a broad vision of the ELA curriculum that includes important knowledge and skills, not only in such traditional areas as language, writing, and literature but also in the areas of informational reading and media, which are also critical but have been historically underrepresented in the ELA curriculum.

The ELA discipline historically has been arranged in a variety of ways to serve as the architecture for standards documents. The draft 2016 TES arrange the content into five strands: (1) Foundational Literacy Standards (grades K–5 only); (2) Language Standards (grades 6–12 only); (3) Reading Standards; (4) Speaking and Listening Standards; and (5) Writing Standards. As suggested earlier, the organization of a set of standards often attempts to reveal significant relationships among the strands, suggesting how the study of one complements the study of another. The different strands function as interdependent units that form a coherent whole. Here are some examples from the draft Tennessee ELA standards:

- The writing standards refer to language conventions.
- The language standards are to be exhibited in students’ reading and writing.
- The writing and research standards require students to draw evidence from what they read.
- The speaking and listening standards explicitly list “Linking Standards” in reading and writing.

The TES do an outstanding job of defining meaningful progressions of expectations throughout the grade levels.

Progression is always a fundamental challenge in ELA standards. Students use many of the same reading and writing skills and strategies across all grade levels (such as identifying the main idea and supporting details, identifying themes, writing topic sentences and focused paragraphs, etc.), but educators expect increasing sophistication and flexibility in the use and application of these skills and strategies to read increasingly challenging texts.

There is not a lot of research available to describe the ideal sequence or progression for how students should be taught and how they should gain individual skills in ELA/literacy. There is, however, substantial research about the importance of reading tasks growing in rigor as students advance through school to meet the increasing reading demands students will face in college and on the job.⁵

⁵ Perfetti, C.A., Landi, N., & Oakhill, J. (2005). “The Acquisition of Reading Comprehension Skill.” In M.J., Snowling & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The Science of Reading: A Handbook*. (pp. 227–247); National Institute of Child

There are many examples of the TES progressing in every domain. Reading standards, for example, progress from identifying main characters to describing how characters respond to major events and challenges, comparing and contrasting characters, and finally, analyzing how authors use techniques to develop characters. Likewise, writing standards progress from using a combination of drawing and dictating to writing to compose opinion pieces, writing opinion pieces supported with reasons and information, and writing arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant and sufficient evidence. These patterns of progressions reflect the demands of rigorous college- and career-ready standards.

Progression was a clear focus of the TES writing team, as evidenced by the introduction to the standards, which states that: “When crafting the 2016 English/Language Arts Standards, the committee focused on the integrated nature of the skills in the discipline and the progression of the skills through the grade levels. Through presenting the standards in a vertical chart by standard rather than with each grade separately, the document emphasizes how the skills for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language spiral through all of the grade levels, leading to post-secondary and workforce readiness” (page 2).

There is one important omission: draft ELA standards do not describe the criteria for effective or productive collaborations. The standards for speaking and listening do include SL.1 — the expectation that students will collaborate — but show the progression only by the level of text and topics being discussed and not by the speaking and listening behaviors that need to be demonstrated.

Specificity

Quality standards are precise and provide sufficient detail to convey the level of performance expected without being overly prescriptive. Standards that maintain a relatively consistent level of precision (“grain size”) are easier to understand and use. Those that are overly broad or vague leave too much open to interpretation, increasing the likelihood that students will be held to different levels of performance, while atomistic standards encourage a checklist approach to teaching and learning that undermines students’ overall understanding of the discipline.

Although the TES simplify and clarify some expectations contained within the benchmark college- and career-ready standards, in some cases the expectations are less precise.

Following are some examples of Tennessee standards in which the expectations would benefit from

Health and Human Development. (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel. *Teaching Children To Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction*. Retrieved October 20, 2015, from www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/smallbook.htm; Cain, K. (2009). “Making Sense of Text: Skills That Support Text Comprehension and its Development.” *Perspectives on Language and Literacy*, 35, 11–14.

additional precision. Additional standards that deserve attention are rated in the side-by-side comparison charts that accompany this narrative report with a “2” (close match, but issues of clarity) or a “3” (partial match, with suggestions for revision).

| TSS | Draft TES | Comments on Precision |
|---|---|---|
| <p>TSS.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and <u>advance the plot or develop the theme.</u></p> | <p>TN.RL.9-10.3. Analyze how complex characters, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text <u>to impact meaning.</u></p> | <p>Revised standard is less precise — e.g., as “... to impact meaning” (TES) vs. to “advance the plot or develop the theme” (TSS). Review committee should consider revising the end of the statement.</p> |
| <p>TSS.RL.9-10.6: Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of <u>world literature.</u></p> | <p>TN.RL.9-10.6. Analyze how point of view and/or author purpose shapes the content and style of <u>diverse texts.</u></p> | <p>The TSS expectation focuses on the point of view or cultural perspectives from world literature. The draft standard expectation unclearly references point of view and author’s purpose and references “diverse texts.” By “point of view,” is what is meant the narration of the text? — as it is in TES grade 6:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">TN.RL.6.6. Explain how an author establishes and conveys the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.</p> <p>Or, is “point of view” intended to mean the author’s perspective? “Diverse” is unclear — is this diversity in terms of U.S. and world literature? Or diversity in terms of genres (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry, drama)? Lastly, what is the “author purpose”? Is this purpose at the broad level — to entertain, to inform, to persuade? Or is the purpose on the level of theme — to communicate an idea through literature?</p> |
| <p>TSS.RL.9-10.7: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including <u>what is emphasized or absent in each treatment</u> (e.g., Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Breughel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).</p> | <p>TN.RL.9-10.7. <u>Evaluate the topic</u>, subject, and/or theme in two diverse formats or media.</p> | <p>As currently drafted, students could evaluate the topic in a painting and then separately evaluate the topic in a song. Is this the intent, or is the intent to compare/contrast and synthesize across the works?</p> |

| | | |
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| <p>TSS.RI.9.10.8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.</p> | <p>TN.RI.9-10.8. Evaluate how reasoning and evidence affects the argument and specific claims in a text.</p> | <p>The specificity in the TSS is important to guide the kinds of activities students should complete with written arguments — particularly since they are expected to produce sophisticated arguments in writing themselves and will need models.</p> |
|---|--|---|

Clarity/Accessibility

Standards should be written in clear, nonjargon-laden prose, thereby communicating in language that can gain widespread acceptance not only from postsecondary faculty but also from employers, teachers, parents, school boards, legislators, and others who have a stake in schooling.

The following are the results of analyzing TES against this criterion:

The format of the draft 2016 TES makes it easy to recognize the progression of skills from grade to grade as well as the parallel expectations set for each skill.

The format of the draft 2016 TES shows the progression of demand and complexity from grade to grade. In addition, the standards include a two-column format to present the reading standards: one column dedicated to literature and another column dedicated to informational text. Using this format allows teachers to see at a glance which skills and abilities in reading are genre-specific, which skills hold true across genres, and how they grow grade to grade.

Moving forward, it would be helpful to also offer grade-level standards (not just the K–12 progression document) so teachers can have in one place all of the demands they need to teach a grade. In addition, the standards would be more user-friendly if the state were to adopt a consistent numbering system to allow users of the document to connect each statement with a unique number for the purposes of quick referencing and showing linkages between domains.

Although the draft 2016 TES parallel very closely the expectations of the benchmark college- and career-ready standards in both their structure and their details, in some situations the standards have honed the language and improved the clarity of statements.

The draft 2016 TES reflect an attempt to clarify the expectations drawn from the benchmark college- and career-ready standards. Tennessee’s draft standards present high levels of rigor comparable to those of the TSS. Important distinctions from the TSS are included in the table below:

| TSS | Draft TES |
|--|--|
| TSS.RI.K.7: With prompting and support, describe the connection between pictures or other illustrations and the overall text in which they appear. | TN.RI.K.7. With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear. |
| TSS.SL.1.2: Demonstrate understanding of written texts read aloud or information presented orally or through media by asking and answering questions about key details and restating key elements. | TN.SL.1.2. Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media. |
| TSS.RL.2.6: Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud. | TN.RL.2.6. Determine when characters have different points of view. |
| TSS.RI.2.3: Describe the connection between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text. | TN.RI.2.3. Describe the connections between a series of historical events, scientific ideas, or steps in a process in a text. |
| TSS.SL.4.6: Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion); use formal English when appropriate to task and situation. (See standards 1–3 in Language, pages 26–31, for specific expectations). | TN.SL.4.6. Recognize that different situations call for formal vs. informal English, and use formal English when appropriate. |

In some places, the draft standards present statements with greater clarity around the expectations for student performance. This is especially evident in the lettered bullets for each writing mode. The standards writing committee includes expectations for vocabulary, language, and style, which in the TSS are presented in separate standards. By including these concepts within the expectations for each writing mode, the draft standards make it easier for students to see clearly what is expected when they produce a piece of writing — and for teachers to create aligned rubrics and review checklists that are comprehensive regarding the characteristics of effective writing.

The TES does not include parenthetical example texts, which makes expectations less clear to all audiences.

The draft TES have an excellent introduction and detailed glossary, but our experience indicates educators tend to go straight to the standards to find out what students are expected to master, so it is helpful to have as much as possible embedded in the actual standards themselves.

Following are some examples from all three levels of schooling. Again, the accompanying side-by-side comparison charts point out additional standards that would benefit from additional clarity.

| TSS | Draft TES | Effect of Removing the Parentheticals |
|--|--|---|
| Grades K–5 | | |
| TSS.RL.K.5: Recognize common types of texts (e.g., <u>storybooks, poems</u>). | TN.RL.K.5. Recognize common types of texts. | Parenthetical in the TSS is helpful for establishing level. |
| TSS.RI.1.5: Know and use various text features (e.g., <u>headings, tables of contents, glossaries, electronic menus, icons</u>) to locate key facts or information in a text. | TN.RI.1.5. Know and use various text features to locate key facts or information in a text. | The parentheticals in the TSS are helpful in clarifying broad terms like “text features.” |
| TSS.RL.2.4: Describe how words and phrases (e.g., <u>regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines</u>) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song. | TN.RL.2.4. Describe how words and phrases supply meaning in a story, poem, or song. | Rhythm is a key focus of the TSS here — and the parenthetical examples help clarify the focus of the TSS expectation. What would the expected performance of grade 2 students be here? Are they defining words? |
| TSS.RI.3.5: Use text features and search tools (e.g., <u>key words, sidebars, hyperlinks</u>) to locate information relevant to a given topic quickly and efficiently. | TN.RI.3.5. Use text features to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently. | The parenthetical examples are helpful in the TSS to define “text features.” |
| TSS.RL.4.3: Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., <u>a character’s thoughts, words, or actions</u>). | TN.RL.4.3. Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text, such as a character’s thoughts, words, or actions. | Inclusion of parenthetical examples from the TSS helps to add clarity to the statement. |
| Grades 6–8 | | |
| TSS.L.6.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on <i>grade 6 reading and content</i> , choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. a. Use context (e.g., <u>the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence</u>) as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase. | TN.L.6.4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on 6th grade-level text by choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. a. Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word or a phrase. b. Use common grade-appropriate morphological elements as clues to the meaning of a word or a phrase. | The TSS language for “b” seems potentially friendlier to a variety of audiences that will use the document, particularly with the examples in the parenthetical. For “b,” will educators be familiar with “morphological elements?” |

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| <p>b. Use common, grade-appropriate Greek or Latin affixes and roots as clues to the meaning of a word (e.g., <u>audience, auditory, audible</u>).</p> <p>c. Consult reference materials (e.g., <u>dictionaries, glossaries, thesauruses</u>), both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or determine or clarify its precise meaning or its part of speech.</p> <p>d. Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase (e.g., <u>by checking the inferred meaning in context or in a dictionary</u>).</p> | <p>c. Consult reference materials, both print and digital, to find the pronunciation of a word or phrase.</p> <p>d. Use etymological patterns in spelling as clues to the meaning of a word or phrase.</p> | |
| <p>TSS.W.6.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.</p> | <p>TN.W.6.10. Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.</p> | <p>Draft standard includes all of the elements in the TSS, but the examples in the parentheses provide teachers with more clarification about what qualifies for “extended” time frames and what qualifies for “shorter” time frames.</p> |
| <p>TSS.L.6.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p> <p>a. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., personification) in context.</p> <p>b. Use the relationship between particular words (e.g., cause/effect, part/whole, item/category) to better understand each of the words.</p> <p>c. Distinguish among the connotations (associations) of words with similar denotations (definitions) (e.g., <i>stingy, scrimping</i>,</p> | <p>TN.L.6.5. When reading, listening, writing, and speaking, explain the function of figurative language, word relationships, and connotation/denotation and use them correctly and effectively.</p> | <p>Draft standard includes all of the elements in the TSS but in a less user-friendly way in terms of specifically guiding teaching and learning and providing examples for readers who may be less familiar with the field of ELA.</p> |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <i>economical, un wasteful, thrifty).</i> | | |
| Grades 9–12 | | |
| TSS.RI.9-10.7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., <u>a person’s life story in both print and multimedia</u>), determining which details are emphasized in each account. | TN.RI.9-10.7. Evaluate the topic or subject in two diverse formats or media. | The parenthetical in the TSS helpfully clarifies that the standard is looking for various accounts of a subject. Otherwise, “two diverse formats” could just mean a text in large font with more spacing vs. one with single space in small font. |
| TSS.RI.9-10.9: Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., <u>Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”</u>), including how they address related themes and concepts. | TN.RI.9-10.9. Analyze a variety of thematically-related texts of historical and literary significance for the way they address related topics, facts, and concepts. | The parentheticals in the TSS are helpful in providing focus through examples. How will TN guide educators in selecting grade-appropriate and content-rich texts? |
| TSS.RI.11-12.8: Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., <u>in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents</u>) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., <u>The Federalist, presidential addresses</u>). | TN.RI.11-12.8. Evaluate how an author incorporates evidence and reasoning to support the argument and specific claims in a text. | Here in the TSS the texts are not just parenthetical examples — they are key to the intent of this expectation. How is this content different from what students were doing in grade 6? TN.RI.6.8. Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not. |
| TSS.RL.11-12.6: Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., <u>satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement</u>). | TN.RL.11-12.6. Analyze how point of view and/or author purpose requires distinguishing what is directly stated in texts and what is implied. | The parenthetical in the TSS is helpful in clarifying the intent of the expectation. Literary point of view could mean narration — does point of view require distinguishing what is explicit and what is implied? Expected performance of students is unclear. |

Measurability

In general, standards should focus on results rather than the processes of teaching and learning. The draft 2016 TES do just that: They present clearly measurable student outcomes that focus on results rather than the processes of teaching and learning. The standards also make use of performance verbs that call for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills rather than those verbs that refer to learning activities (such as examine and explore) or cognitive processes (such as know or appreciate).

Key Recommendations for Tennessee’s Draft English Language Arts Standards

Major Findings

The October 2015 draft of the 2016 Tennessee ELA Standards (referred to in this report as the draft 2016 TES) reflects the best available evidence of what students need to learn to be prepared for college and careers. With two significant exceptions, Tennessee’s draft TES substantially meet Achieve’s criteria. To be well prepared for postsecondary success, high school graduates must be able to apply literacy skills — reading, writing, listening, and speaking — across academic disciplines as well as within career and technical courses. Tennessee’s standards, however, do not attend to developing literacy in the content areas and as a result reduce the likelihood that Tennessee high school graduates will be well prepared. Tennessee should also provide educators clear guidance on what is regarded as the appropriate grade-level complexity of texts.

1. To ensure that the standards are aligned with the demands of postsecondary education and training, standards developers should address the issue of literacy in all content areas, not just in ELA classrooms.

In their present form, the draft 2016 TES do not address the need for instruction in literacy skills in all content areas, including science, social studies, and technical subjects. Reading and writing skills are addressed somewhat differently in the various content areas to reflect the demands of the discipline. Although the most salient characteristics of research remain the same, the final product of a research project in history, for example, differs quite a bit from a research project in chemistry. Tennessee has identified early-grade literacy as a high priority for the state. Developing literacy standards across content areas is one step toward advancing the state’s commitment to improving early-grade literacy.

This issue of cross-content literacy instruction is addressed in a multitude of ways in standards documents. The American Diploma Project (ADP) Benchmarks, for example, provided this commentary on the issue:

These skills, although critical to the study of English, are also necessary to the study of many academic subjects. Therefore, the study and reinforcement of these skills should not be confined to the English classroom or coursework.

The TSS offer an entirely separate set of standards, “Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects,” for grades 6–12 for students to become truly competent readers, writers, and thinkers. (In grades K–5, the reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language standards apply to all content areas.) If Tennessee is planning to extend clear expectations in literacy beyond the ELA classroom, the state should consider addressing how and when it plans to do this in the introduction to the TES. That way, educators will know this is not an oversight.

2. Tennessee’s standards should offer clear guidance on what is regarded as the appropriate grade-level complexity of texts.

In its 2006 report, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*,⁶ ACT found “the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are college ready and students who are not is the ability to comprehend complex texts.” The draft 2016 TES present a stipulation about the level of reading expected at each grade level, beginning in kindergarten, such as this one from grade 5:

*TN.RI.5.10. Read and comprehend stories and informational texts at the high end of the grades 4-5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.*⁷

The only additional guidance offered to educators and students regarding selecting works of appropriate complexity levels is in the glossary, which simply defines the terms “text complexity” and “text complexity band” but does not define the quantitative levels of the grade bands that are referenced in the standards.⁸ Without definition, this approach could easily result in educators retaining the same texts they are teaching now at their grade levels without actually knowing if they are in fact grade-appropriate in terms of complexity.

Reading standards can define grade-level texts in a variety of ways. One way is to offer a reading list. For example, the ADP Benchmarks suggest that the benchmarks should be used in close coordination with reading lists developed by two ADP Network partner states, Indiana and Massachusetts. Another option is to offer judicious use of examples within the standards themselves. Another is to describe and offer tools for teachers to measure text complexity. The TSS describe a variety of quantitative levels and qualitative factors that define text complexity in *Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards*.

In addition, Tennessee’s current standards include within the standards themselves specific requirements regarding the kinds of grade-level appropriate texts that students should read and have access to, including plays by Shakespeare and an American dramatist as well as seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and early 19th-century foundational works of American literature) — exemplars that the draft TES do not include. **Such examples are intended to be illustrative and provide guidance to educators; they are not intended to intrude on local control decisions about curriculum.** Along with

⁶ ACT. (2006). *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*. www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/reading_report.pdf.

⁷ The October 8 draft from Tennessee did not include a numbering system. To refer to specific statements, the following number system was applied to each standard: State Name.Domain.Grade.Standard Number. So TN.RI.5.10 is the Tennessee standard from Reading Informational Text, grade 5, standard #10.

⁸ For example, from grades 9–10, “Read and comprehend a variety of literature at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band proficiently, with a gradual release of scaffolding as needed.”

adding illustrative examples, the new standards could also insert explicit language to clearly signal that the documents listed are only among the options of texts that would prepare students to meet the standards.

As stated, being able to read complex texts across a range of text types is a strong predictor of college and career readiness and prepares students for a wide variety of reading challenges. Reading seminal U.S. documents in particular will help to ensure that students are ready to participate in public discourse and civic life.



Appendix: The Criteria Used for the Evaluation of College- and Career-Ready Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics

| Criteria | Description |
|--|--|
| Rigor: What is the intellectual demand of the standards? | Rigor is the quintessential hallmark of exemplary standards. It is the measure of how closely a set of standards represents the content and cognitive demand necessary for students to succeed in credit-bearing college courses without remediation and in entry-level, quality, high-growth jobs. For Achieve’s purposes, the Common Core State Standards represent the appropriate threshold of rigor. |
| Coherence: Do the standards convey a unified vision of the discipline, do they establish connections among the major areas of study, and do they show a meaningful progression of content across the grades? | The way in which a state’s college- and career-ready standards are categorized and broken out into supporting strands should reflect a coherent structure of the discipline and/or reveal significant relationships among the strands and how the study of one complements the study of another. If college- and career-ready standards suggest a progression, that progression should be meaningful and appropriate across the grades or grade spans. |
| Focus: Have choices been made about what is most important for students to learn, and is the amount of content manageable? | High-quality standards establish priorities about the concepts and skills that should be acquired by graduation from high school. Choices should be based on the knowledge and skills essential for students to succeed in postsecondary education and the world of work. For example, in mathematics, choices should exhibit an appropriate balance of conceptual understanding, procedural knowledge, and problem-solving skills, with an emphasis on application. In English language arts, standards should reflect an appropriate balance between literature and other important areas, such as informational text, oral communication, logic, and research. A sharpened focus also helps ensure that the cumulative knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn are manageable. |
| Specificity: Are the standards specific enough to convey the level of performance expected of students? | Quality standards are precise and provide sufficient detail to convey the level of performance expected without being overly prescriptive. Standards that maintain a relatively consistent level of precision (“grain size”) are easier to understand and use. Those standards that are overly broad or vague leave too much open to interpretation, increasing the likelihood that students will be held to different levels of performance, while atomistic standards encourage a checklist approach to teaching and learning that undermines students’ overall understanding of the discipline. Also, standards that contain multiple expectations may be hard to translate into specific performances. |
| Clarity/Accessibility: Are the standards clearly written and presented in an error-free, legible, easy-to-use format that is accessible to the general public? | Clarity requires more than just plain and jargon-free prose that is also free of errors. College- and career-ready standards also must be communicated in language that can gain widespread acceptance not only from postsecondary faculty but also from employers, teachers, parents, school boards, legislators, and others who have a stake in schooling. A straightforward, functional format facilitates user access. |
| Measurability: Is each standard measurable, observable, or verifiable in some way? | In general, standards should focus on results rather than the processes of teaching and learning. College- and career-ready standards should make use of performance verbs that call for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills and should avoid using those verbs that refer to learning activities — such as “examine,” “investigate,” and “explore” — or to cognitive processes, such as “appreciate.” |