Preface to the Modules:
Introduction to Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum
Introduction

Bringing the Common Core Shifts to Life

EL Education’s Grades 3–8 ELA Curriculum has been designed by teachers for teachers to meet the needs and demands of the Common Core State Standards: to address and bring to life the shifts in teaching and learning required by the CCSS¹. To prepare students for college and the workplace, where they will be expected to read a high volume of complex informational text and write informational text, the shifts highlight the need for students to learn and practice these skills early on. This curriculum has been designed to make this learning process engaging with compelling topics, texts, and tasks.

Some structures, approaches, and strategies may be new to teachers. The materials have been designed to guide teachers carefully through the process of building students’ skills and knowledge in alignment with the standards. The modules also have been designed to build teacher capacity, so that as teachers become more familiar with the structures and strategies, they can adapt the materials to the needs of their specific students.

Four modules make up one year of instruction. Each grade level has six modules; teachers can choose between an A and a B option for two of the modules.

Materials include the following:
• A curriculum plan: lists topic, focus, central texts, major writing tasks, in each module (for grades 3-5 or 6-8 bands)
• A curriculum map: includes module description, assessments, and standards assessed for each module (one map per grade)
• A module overview, which explains the story of the module, standards assessed, and a week-at-a-glance planning chart
• An assessment overview, which explains what is required of students in each assessment and the standards assessed
• A detailed description of the performance task
• Unit overviews for each of the three units, which includes a Unit-at-a-Glance planning chart
• Detailed daily lessons plans and supporting materials

Teachers should read all overview documents carefully, beginning with the curriculum map, before teaching the module. (See separate “Preparing to Teach a Module” document, on commoncoresuccess.elschools.org under “resources”). Overview documents give teachers a clear understanding of the arc of the learning, and inform them of specific preparations required. For example, the module overviews contain suggestions for experts who could come into the classroom and field trips a class could take to enhance their understanding of the topic.

¹ Throughout this document, we refer to the general “paradigm shift” required by the Common Core as well as the specific “instructional shifts” laid out by the authors of the standards. Most states use the simplified version from the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which is synthesized into three shifts: http://www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/. (New York State refers to six instructional shifts: http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts.)
On the unit overview document, teachers should focus on the Unit-at-a-Glance chart: This chart shows the scaffolding and how the instruction progresses from lesson to lesson.

The materials contain instructions for pacing and timing of lessons, oral presentation of material to students, and method of grading assessments. It is assumed that any and all of these instructions, however, are subject to the knowledge and best professional judgment of the teacher about his/her content area, classroom, school, students, and larger community. Look for a forthcoming resource regarding adaptations at commoncoresuccess.elschools.org

The lesson plans are a guide, not a prescribed script. The lesson plans are descriptive to explain the micro-moves that occur within a lesson and to paint a picture. The directions, questions, and times provided in the lesson plans are suggestions that may need to be modified according to the particular needs of students. Teachers can download the MS Word version of the lesson plan files to modify them (see commoncoresuccess.elschools.org). Lessons are 60 minutes long for Grades 3–5 and 45 minutes long for Grades 6–8; these may need to be modified based on school schedules.

The EL Education Touch

EL Education instructional practices emphasize student inquiry, critical thinking, and craftsmanship. In these ELA modules, students engage in original research and deep interdisciplinary investigations of rich academic topics, using their learning to create authentic, high-quality, academic products to share with outside audiences. For example, in Grade 7 Module 2A students create a consumer guide to working conditions in the garment industry to be published.

An EL Education classroom is a collaborative classroom. Throughout every module, students work together. Engaging protocols (compelling structured activities) that give students the opportunity to collaborate have been integrated into lessons. Most protocols repeat a number of times throughout a module to ensure students become familiar with it. Teachers should give themselves time to read and learn the protocols integrated into the lessons, so that the protocols run smoothly with students in the classroom. Videos of many of the protocols in action can be found at http://elschools.org/educator-resources/videos.

Teaching Literacy through Content

To address Shift 1 (Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction and informational texts), students read rich, engaging literary and informational texts and respond to the texts through authentic written and speaking and listening tasks. (For example, in Grade 8 Module 1 students read Inside Out & Back Again, a literary text about a refugee from Vietnam, as well as a number of complex informational texts about the challenges that refugees and immigrants face as they try to settle into another country. Students respond to their reading by writing an essay connecting the ideas in the literary text with the informational texts, and they also write poems in the style of the literary text.) As students work through the content-driven tasks, they build literacy skills by grappling with complex texts, annotating texts, and working to answer text-dependent questions in small groups, through teacher modeling, mini lessons, and independent practice.
Story and Structure of a Module

Story of a Module

Every module has been designed to have a compelling “story,” or conceptual through line, that will make sense to both teachers and students from the first lesson of Unit 1 to the final lesson of Unit 3. Unit 1 engages students in the topic and helps them build background knowledge to understand the “So what?” Then, in Unit 2, students dig deeper to find out more by reading further about the topic. Unit 3 requires students to apply their learning to create an authentic product in the performance task. The sequence of the texts in a module unfolds logically, so students are introduced to a topic and engage in it, while building their knowledge and scaffolding skills to guide them toward mastery of the standards assigned to that module. (For example, in Grade 3 Module 3B students begin by analyzing how the wolf is characterized in traditional stories, folktales, and fables. Then they research real wolves by reading informational texts. Finally, for their performance task, students combine their knowledge of narratives with their research on wolves to write a realistic narrative about wolves.)

Structure of Module

Each module comprises eight weeks of instruction, broken into three units. Each module includes seven assessments: six unit-level assessments—one in the middle of each unit and one at the end—assessing students’ independent work on a reading, writing, speaking, or listening task, plus one final performance task that is a more supported project, often involving research.
Assessments

Each unit includes two assessments, most of which are “on-demand” (i.e., for students to “show what you know”/can do on your own). Typically, mid-unit assessments are reading assessments with text-based answers, and end of unit assessments involve writing from sources. Most assessments emphasize academic vocabulary, particularly determining words in context.

Assessments should be given to students only when they have had sufficient time and practice to master the skills on which they will be assessed. If, based on formative assessment data, a majority of students in a class are not ready for an assessment, it is important that teachers provide students with the additional time and practice they need before administering the assessments. Teachers should be monitoring and informally assessing student mastery of the standards on an ongoing/daily basis leading up to the assessment to recognize when students require more time and practice on a particular skill. The rubrics used for grading in the assessments could be used to grade work products informally throughout the unit. Unless noted otherwise, assessments are to be completed independently order to effectively assess student mastery of skills, so classrooms may need to be set up to give students adequate space away from peers. The assessments all contain answer keys and grading rubrics.

Assessments are designed to be curriculum-embedded opportunities to practice some of the types of skills needed on state assessments. Modules include a variety of assessment types: selected response (multiple-choice questions), short constructed-response, extended response (either on-demand or supported), speaking and listening (discussion or oral presentation), and scaffolded essays (involving planning, drafting, and revision).

It is important that teachers make time to return student assessments with feedback and to confer with students who require additional support or guidance, particularly on written assessments. Some time for this has been built into the modules, but teachers should use their judgment and modify that time according to the needs of their students. For more information regarding the design of assessments in the modules, or how to create similar CC-aligned assessments, see the stand-alone document Assessment Design in EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum.

Role of the Performance Task

The performance task is a culminating project that takes place during Unit 3. It differs from other six assessments in that, through a series of engaging scaffolded lessons, students create a more authentic real-world product that challenges them to synthesize and apply their learning from the module. Performance tasks are developed using the writing process and almost always include peer critique and revision. Models of performance tasks are provided for students to analyze and deconstruct in order to create something comparable themselves. Performance tasks are not “on-demand” assessments. Often, the on-demand End of Unit 3 assessment addresses key components of the performance task. (For example, in Grade 4 Module 4 students create a public service announcement about the importance of voting. In Unit 3, students listen to and read the transcript of a model PSA to identify the purpose and criteria of their task. They also read two articles about youth voting use these texts to gather evidence to support reasons why voting is important. Then, students select two reasons to feature in the PSAs and craft their scripts. After practicing their PSAs and receiving feedback from their peers, they present their final PSAs to an audience.)
Integrating Reading, Writing, Speaking & Listening, and Language Strands of CCSS

Although the ELA strands of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language have been separated for conceptual clarity, the different processes of communication are tightly interwoven in the standards. (For example, W.9, a writing standard, requires students to draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. Students have to read in order to write. SL.1, a speaking and listening standard, requires students to engage effectively in collaborative discussions about topics, texts, and issues. Students have to read in order to be able to discuss.)

Reading

| Shift 3 | Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction | Students read a true balance of informational and literacy texts. Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) through text rather than the teacher or activities. |

To address Shift 3, the modules require students to read a balance of complex informational and literary texts. Students build knowledge about the world by reading different text types, including but not limited to poems, novels, nonfiction books, academic papers, and newspaper articles. Reading is a focus of the modules—students read in order to build knowledge and have something to write about. They continuously engage in close reading, reading to research, and independent reading. In many of the modules, literary texts are paired with informational texts to engage students in a topic or issue before students read to find out more about it in informational texts. (For example, in Grade 6 Module 3A students read *Dragonwings*, a high-interest novel about a Chinese immigrant living in San Francisco at the time of the 1906 earthquake and fires, before they read informational texts, including eyewitness accounts, about the event.)

Text Complexity and Academic Vocabulary

| Shift 1 | Regular practice with complex text and its academic language | Students constantly build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade-level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts. |

To address Shift 1, the standards require students to read more complex texts in order to build academic vocabulary. The texts in the modules may be more complex than students are accustomed to, but students often read and reread small excerpts at a much slower pace, and they think, talk, and write about the text to deepen their understanding. (For example, in Grade 5 Module 1 students closely read and then think, talk, and write about just 11 articles of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.) Students often annotate text; teachers may provide sticky notes for students to annotate any texts on which students may not mark. Initially students may struggle with some texts, but as they learn close reading skills and become more familiar with strategies for finding the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, they will become more comfortable with reading increasingly complex texts.
In every module, as students closely read complex texts, they do vocabulary work to become more familiar with Tier Two academic vocabulary words and to learn strategies to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words. Where possible, students use these strategies (e.g. looking for roots and prefixes or identifying the meaning through the context) to find word meanings without teacher support. But for texts in which there is a lot of unfamiliar vocabulary, students are either given a glossary or the teacher gives students some words to ensure they have time to dig into the meaning.

Most modules contain recording forms or suggested ways students can record new academic and domain-specific vocabulary. To reinforce the vocabulary meaning and how to use new words in an appropriate context, it is important that teachers encourage students to use new vocabulary in their discussions and writing.

Close Reading and “Close Reading Guides”

To thoroughly understand the complex texts that students are required to read, they learn many strategies to help them with reading closely. There is not one set of steps or method for close reading. Rather, close reading is a set of skills that help students to read in order to gain a deep understanding of a complex text. (For more information about close reading, see Shanahan 2013).

The skills they learn in the modules help students to read closely with increasing independence, and with increasingly complex texts. Students learn how to find the gist of a text (an initial sense of what the text is mostly about), strategies for identifying the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, and how to ask questions of a text in order to more deeply comprehend the meaning. Often, students read and analyze small sections of complex text—sometimes as little as one key paragraph in a given lesson—to ensure they fully understand the content.

This close analysis is often supported with a Close Reading Guide, a teacher resource to help guide students in a close reading process to deeply understand a text. Students reread the text to deconstruct its meaning, and then reconstruct the meaning using evidence. The teacher uses a series of text-dependent questions to scaffold students’ understanding of the text. A Close Reading Guide includes questions that:

- Support the understanding of the **meaning** of the text
- Support the understanding/knowledge of **language** in the text
- Support the understanding of the **structure** of a text
- Build a **knowledge** base (i.e. schema that an author of a text may assume readers already have)

(For more information see stand-alone document *Helping Students Read Closely in EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum*.)

Research

The Common Core instructional shifts require students to read more of a balance between literary and informational texts, and to build knowledge of the world through the informational texts that they read. In the modules, before students research a topic, teachers help them begin building background knowledge and domain-specific vocabulary, and spark their interest for inquiry. They then read a variety of informational texts to answer a research question and build expertise in that topic. Throughout the reading process, students write to record the information most relevant to their inquiry, and are shown how to organize the information they gather in journals, on graphic organizers, or in researcher’s notebooks.
For example, in Grade 8 Module 4, Unit 1, students read key excerpts of the informational text *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* build background knowledge about where food comes from and how it gets to our plates. In Unit 2 they research online to answer a research question about one of the “food chains” discussed in the Unit 1 text. Students record the answers they find through research in a “researcher’s notebook.” Then in Unit 3 they present their position. (See also the stand-alone document *Teaching the Research Standards in EL Education Grades 3–8 ELA Curriculum.*)

**Independent Reading**

| Shift 3 | Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction | Students build knowledge about the world (domains/content areas) through text rather than the teacher or activities. |
| Shift 1 | Regular practice with complex text and its academic language | Students constantly build the transferable vocabulary they need to access grade-level complex texts. This can be done effectively by spiraling like content in increasingly complex texts. |

In order to address Shifts 1 and 3, students must read a high volume of text. Providing students with opportunities to read independently and with tasks that require them to respond to their reading will increase students’ volume of reading and hold students accountable. The modules provide opportunities for independent reading; however, teachers must have independent reading routines implemented that continue alongside the modules. For more suggestions about how to incorporate more independent reading and a volume of reading into your ELA program, see final section of two resources on commocoresuccess.elschools.org (*Foundational Reading and Language Standards for Grades 3–5 Resource Package*, or *Common Core Interventions for Adolescent Readers.*)

**Reading Foundations in Grades 3–5**

Although foundational reading and language standards are addressed within the context of the module lessons, particularly within Module 2B, the 60-minute module lessons for Grades 3–5 alone do not represent enough time to comprehensively meet the foundational reading and language standards. To ensure that students receive adequate support building foundational reading and language skills, as well as sufficient time to meet the volume of reading required by the CCSS, research suggests that an additional block of literacy instruction and skills practice is needed.

The *Foundational Reading and Language Standards Resources Package for Grades 3–5* articulates the research base for instruction regarding reading foundations standards; points teachers to where that instruction lives “within the modules”; and, most importantly, offers teachers options about how to organize an additional literacy block to comprehensively address these standards beyond and alongside the module lessons.
Writing

Before writing, students need to understand the ideas they are working with and how to structure and craft those ideas in writing. They need to know enough about what they are writing about, which comes from reading enough about the topic in order to build background knowledge. In the modules, students always read to build knowledge about a topic before they write, which ensures they have something to write about. They often analyze the ideas of different authors to identify the direction in which to focus their writing. For more information, see the stand-alone document Writing in the Modules.

Writing from Sources

| Shift 2 | Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational | Writing emphasizes use of evidence from sources to inform or make an argument. |

Shift 2 requires students to use evidence from sources in their writing to inform or make an argument. In the modules, students learn how to closely read text and analyze it for evidence that they can use in writing to inform or make an argument. They learn how to quote from sources, how to list sources, and at the middle school grade levels how to cite sources in a bibliography. For example, in Grade 7 Module 4 students closely read complex informational texts and gather quotes and information about the effects of screen time in order to cite evidence in a position paper to answer the question: “After examining both the potential benefits and risks of entertainment screen time, particularly to adolescent development, make a recommendation. Should the AAP raise the recommended daily entertainment screen time from two hours to four hours?” Students are required to provide a “Works Cited” list for their position paper.

Writing Scaffolding

When students are required to complete extended writing tasks, units are carefully designed to scaffold the necessary reading and writing skills and understanding. This scaffolding includes reading to gather evidence, evaluating the evidence to make a claim, analyzing a model piece of writing against a rubric, completing a series of mini lessons to address language standards, drafting the writing a little at a time, peer critique, teacher feedback, and then writing a final copy. For example, for the Grade 6 Module 3B performance task, students create an informational consumer guide about what people need to know about overfishing and fish depletion when buying fish. They read excerpts of the informational text World without Fish and other relevant informational articles to gather ideas and evidence, which they then evaluate to determine which ideas and evidence to use in their writing. They analyze a model informative consumer guide against a rubric, generate criteria for their informative consumer guide, and then draft the content of their own guide a little at a time. Throughout the writing process they learn about formal style, sentence structure, and transitions through mini lessons and apply this learning to revise and refine their writing. They receive peer and teacher feedback before writing a final draft of their informative consumer guide.

The Unit-at-a-Glance charts provide a snapshot of the scaffolding for writing tasks in a given unit. Teachers should read the “Supporting Targets” column of the Unit-at-a-Glance chart, because the supporting targets highlight what is required of the students in each of the lessons leading up to the assessment.
Further Writing

To address the shifts and ensure students have time to read and deeply understand complex texts, the modules heavily emphasize reading. Although most modules contain at least one extended piece of writing and many quick write and short on-demand responses to reading, teachers may wish to provide students with more opportunities to write extended responses to their reading.

For more information, see resources on commcoresuccess.elschools.org (Writing Instruction in EL Education Grades 3-8 ELA Curriculum.)

Speaking and Listening

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<tr>
<th>Shift 2</th>
<th>Reading, writing and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational</th>
<th>Students engage in rich and rigorous evidence-based conversations about text.</th>
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The strands of the CCSS are intentionally integrated, because speaking and listening supports the reading and writing process. Discussion about texts with peers can enable students to gain a deeper understanding of what they are reading, and sharing ideas before and during the writing process can help students to organize and refine their thinking, “When students talk, they think ... talking provides students with practice with the language and an opportunity to clarify their understanding in the presence of their peers” (Frey and Fisher, 2010).

In every module, in order to address Shift 2 and standard SL.1, students engage in structured collaborative discussion in pairs, small groups, and as a whole group about the topics and texts they are reading. Before group work, students work with the teacher to establish norms to ensure productive discussion and to hold students accountable for their interactions with their peers. Simple routines such as “Think-Pair-Share” are used in almost every lesson. Discussion protocols such as “Fishbowls” and “Concentric Circles” (see Appendix) are integrated throughout the modules to give students structured opportunities to share their thinking and ideas orally, and to listen to and respond thoughtfully to the ideas of others. Students regularly reflect and are assessed (informally and formally) on their speaking and listening skills. Through strategic questioning and feedback, teachers are encouraged to constantly remind students of effective discussion habits in order to make them successful communicators.

The Common Core requires teachers and students alike to shift away from a more teacher-centered classroom to one in which students are engaged in productive collaborative discourse with peers for much more of the time. When peer interaction is managed effectively, students find it engaging and productive. Talking through ideas helps them simultaneously build content knowledge and literacy skills.
Standards Assessed and Ongoing Assessment

The four strands of the standards—reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language—are integrated in the modules. Students read in order to have something to write and talk about, and many assessments assess multiple strands. Across each module, the standards have been bundled to complement one another.

The standards in each assessment signal the skills students need to have mastered by the time they reach the assessment. Reading the unit overview before teaching a module is crucial to understanding the standards and skills students will work on throughout a unit. The modules give students multiple opportunities to practice skills they will be assessed on before the assessment. (For example, if an assessment addresses RL.6, the lessons before that assessment provide multiple opportunities for teacher modeling and student practice of the skills required from that standard.)

Engagement Strategies and Differentiation

The modules were designed around compelling topics, texts, and performance tasks to engage all students. In lessons, students are engaged through the use of routines and strategies such as the following:

- Learning targets: objectives in student-friendly language. These are shared with students in the opening of every lesson. For example, "I can support my inferences with details and examples from the text."
- Checking for Understanding strategies: simple strategies to get a pulse of the class. For example, before beginning an activity, the teacher may ask students to show on their fingers (a fist means they don’t understand, and five fingers means understand fully) whether they understand what they need to do.
- Total participation strategies and protocols: predictable processes. (For example, Grade 5 Module 4 begins with a Gallery Walk to look at images and text related to natural disasters. Students record what they observe, their questions, and inferences.) Directions for the protocols and strategies are found in the Appendix and are easily transferable for use in other contexts beyond the ELA modules. See the stand-alone document Appendix: Protocols and Resources.

The “Teaching Notes” and “Meeting Students' Needs” sections of lesson plans suggest ways activities can be differentiated.

Our Approach to Homework

Due to the rigors demanded by the CCSS, in EL Education’s Grades 3–8 ELA curriculum, students are required to practice the skills they learn in the classroom independently at home every day, for approximately 30–45 minutes. This usually involves a reading activity (e.g., reading or rereading a certain number of paragraphs or pages in a text) with a response task (e.g., highlighting or recording evidence to answer a question). Students also are expected to read independently every evening according to independent reading routines.
Professional Judgment and Flexibility When Using the Modules

The modules were designed as guides. The level of detail is descriptive to help teachers visualize a lesson as it unfolds rather than to be a script that must be followed exactly. Teachers are encouraged to use their professional judgment and expertise when following the lesson plans and to be flexible according to the needs of their particular students. Some students may require more time watching the teacher model, or may require repeated teacher modeling to be able to successfully work independently. This may require additional flexibility with other parts of the lesson in order to finish within the allocated time period.

Teachers are encouraged to analyze and understand the backwards design of the modules before making adaptations. Begin by reading the curriculum map to understand when standards are addressed across the year; the module-level documents (module overview, assessment overview, and description of the performance task) to understand the story and structure of the module as well as the standards addressed. Then move on to read the unit overviews, to gain a deeper understanding of where and how standards are assessed and how the lessons scaffold student skills and understanding toward the assessments. Lesson plans should also be read thoroughly in advance to be aware of specific preparations and to get an idea of the flow and transitions of the lesson and the kinds of questions to ask to deepen student understanding. (For more information, see the stand-alone document Preparing to Teach a Module.)

Conclusion

These modules have been designed to guide teachers in how to effectively enable their students to achieve mastery of the CCSS and how to address the shifts demanded by the CCSS. The module materials provide everything necessary to enable teachers to engage students in learning transferable skills through compelling texts, authentic tasks, and topics that inspire a sense of joy in the teaching and learning process. Teachers are able to focus on the students because the lesson planning and preparation of materials have been done.

References
