

Review of Final Version of the Tennessee English Language Arts Standards
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Although the charge to the Tennessee State Board of Education was to replace Common Core’s standards with rigorous Tennessee Education Standards, the elaborate process for developing standards, outlined by the State Board of Education in a brief document titled Agenda and dated April 15, 2016, completely failed the people of Tennessee. The Tennessee English Language Arts Standards are neither rigorous nor tailored to Tennessee. In fact, the original Common Core standards were stronger in that they offered a few specific titles to be studied. They are all gone in the Tennessee version of Common Core. Even the requirement to read one Shakespeare play is gone. In no way did the Tennessee Department of Education or its revision committee strengthen Common Core’s weak standards. It weakened them even more. These standards are not “warmed-over Common Core.” They are Common Core-lite.

1. The new standards contain nothing to indicate they are for students in Tennessee or in the country in which it is still a state. The new standards could easily have been written on Mars for Martians.

A. The new standards omit the study of “foundational U.S. documents,” as spelled out for grades 11/12 in Common Core Standard 9:

Grades 11/12. 9. Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Here is the comparable new standard for Tennessee:

In place of Common Core Standard 9 in 11/12, we find: “Analyze and evaluate a variety of thematically-related texts of historical and literary significance for their topics, facts, purposes, and rhetorical features.”

The documents spelled out in the Common Core standard were not examples of titles to be studied but actual documents to be analyzed. So who took required texts for analysis out of Standard 9 in grades 11/12? And why? Is Tennessee not part of the U.S. anymore? The Declaration of Independence and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address have long been studied in English classes in this country.

B. Examples to clarify the meaning of a standard, as in Common Core Standard 9 for grades 9/10, were also taken out. These examples, like others in Common Core, serve to clarify the meaning of the standards. Here is Common Core’s standard:

Grades 9/10. 9. Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.

Here is the comparable new standard for Tennessee:

In place of Common Core Standard 9 in 9-10, we find: “Analyze a variety of thematically related texts of historical and literary significance for the way they address related topics, facts, and concepts.”

Both of these standards have been altered in the Tennessee Education Standards so that they no longer refer to U.S. documents at all. They are bare of any clarification. Why are teachers being mystified?

2. The new standards contain nothing on Tennessee itself. There is not one standard requiring students to read literary texts by recognized writers born in Tennessee or who wrote in Tennessee. There is not one standard requiring K-12 students to read non-literary texts about Tennessee history, events, well-known leaders (e.g., TVA, President Jackson, Civil War battles, Sergeant York, Cordell Hull). Was the SDE ashamed of the state whose taxes support it?

3. The section titled “Tennessee's State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects” is a direct copy of what is in the Common Core ELA document. After the title page, which is mysteriously numbered page 3, the page numbering begins with page 60, a sloppy mistake. The only change made by the State Department of Education (SDE) to the original Common Core material was the title page and the running head at the top of each page to make it appear that the text was the work of Tennessee teachers and/or its Department of Education. Other than the word “Tennessee” in the title itself, this section (pp. 60-66) is the work of the Common Core project, and acknowledgment should have been made. This ethical lapse by the SDE is an example of plagiarism that students and teachers should note.

4. There is no table of contents, but there is poor editing. After K-5 standards for Foundational Literacy, there is a short text on Language for K-12, followed by Foundational Literacy for 6-12.

5. The vocabulary standards are very weak (pp. 22-24) because they are taken almost directly from Common Core’s weak standards. There is absolutely no reason for any teacher in any state to ask students to “use context” to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word in well-written texts. It can’t be done, and it’s a waste of everyone’s time. But there are legitimate vocabulary standards that could have been inserted into this document. Vocabulary knowledge is the key to reading comprehension, and there’s almost nothing here for teachers to use.

6. The major problem in this document is a lack of understanding of what a developmental progression of standards should look like. The SDE correctly understood that vertical formatting can show developmental progressions (i.e., going grade by grade in a strand to show how standards change in their intellectual demand as the standards get progressively higher in grade level).

However, we see almost no developmental progressions in the vertical arrangements for ELA strands. The standards are worded almost identically and have about the same meaning as one moves up the grades. (Look at most of the Reading standards in 6-12, from p. 26 on.) Lack of developmental progressions was a key problem in Common Core. The SDE didn’t address the problem. Common Core’s standards were organized by grade level, so the “new” Tennessee standards don’t look exactly like Common Core’s because they’ve been reformatted for Tennessee teachers. But Tennessee’s teachers are not likely to be fooled. Many, perhaps most, of the standards and the overall organization of the standards are almost the same as in Common Core.

7. Worst of all for 6-12 English teachers in Tennessee, the document expects a 50/50 division between literary texts and informational texts/literary nonfiction. (What is meant by literary nonfiction is never exemplified in the document itself—even with one example). This 50/50 division never made sense in Common Core (no empirical or historical research to support an idea dreamed up by someone) and Tennessee Department of Education staffers simply copied the notion directly without surveying the state’s English teachers independently for their professional judgment (see p. 26). Such a division can make sense only in a self-contained classroom in K-5, where the teacher teaches children’s literature in one or two periods and then teaches informational material for other subjects for much of the rest of the day.

8. The document contains far too many standards on writing, speaking, and listening, and much too little on reading, which is the basis for achievement in all academic areas and for all adult language skills. And about all Tennessee teachers can use as a guide to the development of their classroom curriculum in reading or literature is a Lexile rating! There are NO expectations for literary or non-literary reading levels or titles or periods or

movements through the grades. Surely, there must be some English teachers in Tennessee who know what a literature or reading standards is.

9. The Foundational Reading standards for K-5 are the solid part of this document (up to Vocabulary Use). They will be very useful for Tennessee. Students may learn to read in the primary grades. However, there is nothing—anywhere—to guide teachers in the texts they use to “read to learn” throughout the grades. These Common Core-based standards do not lead to equity but to semi-literate high school students incapable of reading high school-level material in high school and unprepared for college or career or citizenship.

10. In sum, the Tennessee English Language Arts Standards, already approved by its State Board of Education, seem to be designed to promote low academic achievement in all Tennessee students. Surely, there must be high school English teachers and college-level professors of English, rhetoric, and composition in the state of Tennessee with higher standards than whoever created this document.