

Grades 6–8 ELA/Literacy Considerations for the 2020–21 School Year

In the middle school grades, students analyze, define, compare, and evaluate ideas with more precision when reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They apply skills they learned in earlier grades to make sense of a range of more challenging books and articles as they address various topics. In particular, students’ ability to cite specific evidence and make use of the academic language and knowledge they’ve encountered in their own reading when writing in response to texts matures. As they work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, students also learn to question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and assess the accuracy of his or her claims. Students continue to expand their vocabularies and use new words in their stories, reports, and essays. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to readers or listeners or constructively evaluating others’ use of evidence. This ability helps students in every facet of their studies.

Keep Grade-Level Complex Text at the Center of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language Instruction

Regular Close Reading of Grade-Level Complex, Anchor Texts

See RL.10 and RI.10 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Focus all students on the same rich, grade-level anchor texts as defined by the quantitative chart below and the qualitative features of texts (such as meaning, structure, language, and knowledge demands). Focus on these anchor texts multiple times a week³² as school disruptions allow.
- Organize units around conceptually-related topics (and content-rich themes for literary texts) that build knowledge through anchor texts and volume of reading. Set aside skills-paced calendars.
- Provide and adjust instructional scaffolds so every student can engage with grade-level texts, rather than restrict students to texts at their prescribed independent reading level. Scaffolds could include building knowledge about the topic of the text under study, providing access to texts read aloud, etc. ^{*33}

³² Suggestions included throughout on the regularity with which practices should be undertaken reflect in school times and patterns. These should be moderated as school disruptions allow.

³³ Asterisk (*) are placed by instructional content and practice that contribute to students’ sense of belonging and safety, efficacy, value for effort and growth, as well as a sense of engagement in work that is relevant and culturally responsive. These reflect and bolster the samples included below in the section titled “Facilitate SEAD Through Close Reading of Complex Texts.”

Grade Band	Lexile Range
6–8	925–1185
When selecting anchor texts, also consider qualitative features of texts (such as meaning, structure, language, and knowledge demands).	

Sequences of Text-Specific Questions and Tasks to Support Close Reading

See RL.1 and RI.1 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Text Evidence.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Provide sequences of questions that engage students deeply with the text and build understanding.
- Design instruction to cultivate every student’s ability to read carefully and grasp information—both what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from texts.
- Encourage students to cite specific text evidence (quotes and examples) when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener and constructively evaluating others’ use of evidence.*
- Provide time for students to engage meaningfully with the anchor text by reading or rereading portions.

Systematic Work with Text-Based Vocabulary and Syntax

See RL.4, RI.4, L.4, L.5 and L.6. for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Vocabulary and Syntax Important to Comprehension or Expression.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Use text-based questions and tasks to focus on academic and domain-specific words that merit more attention (e.g., critical for understanding the text, part of large word families). Do this, rather than memorizing text-agnostic word lists.
- Provide supplemental practice on text-based vocabulary through games, exercises, and focus on word parts and their morphology.
- Encourage the use of the targeted words from the anchor text throughout discussions and writing assignments.
- Regularly—and daily if possible—choose one complex and compelling sentence from the anchor text to deconstruct and reconstruct with students.

Frequent Evidence-Based Discussions About Grade-Level Anchor Texts

See SL.1 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Conversations and Collaborations Centered on Evidence.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Design daily opportunities for students to process and extend their learning through collaborative, small-group, or partner text-based discussions:*
 - Make strategic use of peer partnerships to promote as much productive talk as possible.*
 - Have students reflect on each other’s thinking using evidence, as well as considering and challenging others’ perspectives.*
 - Teach the language of argumentation to facilitate students taking positions on what they’re reading and hearing from others.*

Regular Evidence-Based Writing About Grade-Level Anchor Texts

See W.9 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Writing to Evidence.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Connect writing to what students are reading to deepen comprehension, check for understanding, and ensure all students have equal access to the topic on which they’re writing.*
- Include writing assignments connected to the literary texts students are reading that target perspective-taking and exploring the emotions and motivations of characters as an on-ramp to self-exploration and reflection.*
- Reserve non-text-based writing prompts to advance specific goals rooted in social-emotional learning (reflect on feelings, foster artistic expression, write personal stories).*
- Vary writing assignments (short on-demand pieces or longer multi-day pieces) throughout the week, if possible.

Fluency Practice With Grade-Level Anchor Texts

Extend RF.4 through grades 6–8 – Fluency of Grade-Level Text.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Engage in fluency exercises—daily if possible—through regular and repeated readings of texts. (This includes all students except those who demonstrate oral fluency with grade-level texts.)
- Attend to prosody (pitch, stress, and timing) as students read aloud.
- Fulfill public speaking demands by having students select grade-level seminal texts and speeches to practice and perform with peers.*
- Ensure students have time to discuss the meaning of the text and address text-based vocabulary as needed, even when improving fluency is the focus.

Facilitate SEAD Through Close Reading of Complex Texts

Sample actions for how SEAD can be effectively integrated in ELA/literacy instruction:

- Ensure anchor texts throughout the curriculum reflect and reveal accurately a multicultural world and resonance with learners.
- Include perspective-taking in the study of literary texts by attending to how characters might think and feel to support understanding emotions and thoughts. Perspective-taking can also be included with informational text to similarly highlight multiple perspectives, or investigate claims, purpose, and reasoning of an author or topic.
- Empower students to monitor their own comprehension and fluency through cycles of action and reflection.
- Provide a variety of text-dependent writing, speaking, performance, or multimedia task options for students to express their comprehension, knowledge, and skills.
- Establish student discussion protocols to facilitate evidence-based discourse about text that supports active listening, values diverse perspectives and insights, and ensures there is equity of voice and responsibility.
- Include collaborative conversations that require students to integrate the perspective of their peers into their own critical thinking.
- Encourage students to draw on their emotional and empathetic skills as they orally express their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and arguments.

Rationale and Research

Regular Close Reading of Grade-Level Complex, Anchor Texts

- The complexity of the text is the element that most differentiates performance, not the skills supposedly captured in the verbs used to describe the skills (ACT, 2006).

- Providing readers not yet reading at grade level with complex texts improves their achievement. Leveled reading approaches are not based on evidence; those approaches stunt the growth of students' reading comprehension and create inequitable outcomes (Brown et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2000).
- Students cannot learn how to comprehend complex text independently unless they are given complex text to read (Shanahan et al., 2012).

Sequences of Text-Specific Questions and Tasks to Support Close Reading

- Students (all people) understand and remember what they pay attention to and think about. Attending to evidence in text leads to understanding and retaining text content (Willingham, 2010).
- Text-dependent questions and tasks can also serve as a scaffold to ensure that students are fully understanding the text under study, keeping the text at the center of instruction (McKeown et al., 2009).

Systematic Work with Text-Based Vocabulary and Syntax

- Robust academic language gives students access to complex texts and allows them to write and communicate with precision. The things we know have to be named and described by words when encountered in print. (Adams, 2011).

Frequent Evidence-Based Discussions About Grade-Level Anchor Texts

- Evidence-based discourse with text-dependent questions is both a scaffold to and a goal of literacy development. Processing evidence found in text through oral discourse results in deeper comprehension of text than strategies-based approaches (McKeown et al., 2009).

Regular Evidence-Based Writing About Grade-Level Anchor Texts

- Writing about what students have read, educators ensure that all students have the knowledge needed to focus on writing craft. (Hawkins et al., 2008).
- Writing about texts is one of the most effective things that students can do to improve their reading comprehension and knowledge (Burke & Gilmore, 2015; Willingham, 2010).

Fluency Practice With Grade-Level Anchor Texts

- Reading fluency has a direct correlation with reading comprehension. Dysfluency causes as much as 40% of the variance in student performance (Pinnell et al., 1995).
- Reading prosody and word identification accuracy predicts more than half of the variance in a standardized test of reading comprehension administered to struggling ninth-grade readers. Many students can experience reading improvement in minutes (Paige & Magpuri-Lavell, 2014).

Build Knowledge Through Reading, Writing, and Speaking about Topics Under Study in ELA, History, Science, and Technical Subjects

Regular Reading of Multiple Texts and Media on a Range of Conceptually Related Topics

See W.8 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Research and Wide Reading on Topics; CCSS-Distribution of Literary and Informational Passages.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

- Choose content-rich informational texts that are topically connected to the anchor texts or topic under study to build students’ knowledge about the topic and maximize their breadth of exposure to academic vocabulary.
- Offer students texts that span a range of complexity levels so they can read the texts independently, with peers, or with modest support.*³⁴ This should include a balance of literature and informational texts across content areas of ELA, science, history, the arts, and technical subjects.

Grade	Literary	Informational
6–8	45%	55%

Regular Research, Discussion, and Writing About Topics

See W.8 for specific guidance from each grade level – Research and Wide Reading on Topics. See SL.1 for specific guidance from each of grades 6–8 – Conversations and Collaborations Centered on Evidence and Research. See also RI.9 from each of grades 6–8 – Integrating Information and Knowledge From Texts on the Same Topic.

Considerations for Instructional Content and Practices

³⁴ Asterisks (*) are placed by instructional content and practice that contribute to students’ belonging and safety, sense of efficacy, and growth mindset as well as a sense that what they are learning has value and relevance. These reflect and bolster the samples included below in the section titled “Facilitate SEAD Through Research, Writing, and Speaking About a Volume of Topically Connected Texts.”

- Ask students regularly to research, then express—orally and in writing—information gained from multiple texts and auxiliary resources (e.g., illustrations, video clips, maps) to build knowledge on a topic.*
- Promote independent reading, by providing options for students to choose topically connected texts. (These can be driven by student interest, topic of anchor text, and course content.)*
- Integrate what students have just read (and learned) with what they have previously read (and learned) to build a more coherent understanding of a topic. Design collaborative, small-group, or partner discussions on topics for students to process and extend their learning.*
- Add lightweight student accountability for regularly engaging in a volume of reading both assigned (related to the topics and themes being studied) and chosen by students.

Facilitate SEAD Through Research, Writing, and Speaking About a Volume of Topically Connected Texts

Sample actions for how SEAD can be effectively integrated in ELA/literacy instruction:

- Ensure instruction and materials are responsive to students’ existing funds of knowledge as well as connecting students to a shared knowledge of the world through the study of conceptually coherent topics.
- Anchor topical knowledge building in collaborative opportunities for students to conduct research while practicing cooperation, communication, innovation, reflection, self-regulation, and empathy.
- Create space and opportunity for students to identify and explore their own interests and fascinations.
- Develop and strengthen writing in response to feedback from others or after recognizing independently that another approach is indicated in light of audience and purpose.

Rationale and Research

Regular Reading of Multiple Texts and Media on a Range of Conceptually Related Topics

- Knowledge of a subject aids thinking, memory, and learning of new information (Willingham, 2006).
- Reading ability and knowledge about the world are tightly connected (Kintsch, 1998).
- Students’ knowledge of the topic has been shown to have a greater impact on reading comprehension than generalized reading ability (Recht & Leslie, 1988).
- Informational texts are excellent sources from which students can learn about the world and how things work; they can be used to systematically build students’ cumulative knowledge over time (Hirsch, 2006).

Regular Research, Discussion, and Writing About Topics

- Building knowledge and domain-specific vocabulary play an essential role in the literacy development of students. To build this essential knowledge and vocabulary, students must read, analyze, discuss, and write about a range of conceptually coherent topics (Cervetti et al., 2016; Landauer & Dumais, 1997).

- It is through volume and range of writing that students gain mastery of a variety of writing skills and applications (Burke & Gilmore, 2015; Willingham, 2010). When students do the grappling and the heavy-lifting, new skills and content stick.
- Students learn significantly more vocabulary when they read texts about conceptually coherent topics for a period of time (Cervetti et al., 2016; Landauer & Dumais, 1997).