Regardless of whether you are a fan or a naysayer, the new Common Core State Standards are coming your way. Although you might live in one of the few nonadopter states, your reading and language arts program is likely to reflect these standards, thanks to guidelines provided to the publishers of materials. These new standards demand better analysis and argumentation skills, a greater emphasis on academic language, and greater attention to students building content knowledge and reading skills from independently tackling information text. Moreover, they involve teachers from all subjects in teaching the literacy skills of their disciplines.

Grappling with teaching the skills demanded by these new standards, therefore, will be no small challenge to teachers. However, it’s a challenge that we should embrace. It clearly positions reading as the centerpiece of learning. As a primary source of information, it recognizes that reading text contributes to the development of content knowledge and that reading volumes of quality text can make you smarter (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Furthermore, the consequences of reading are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Those who know a lot are likely to learn a lot more—and faster; in other words, knowledge precipitates getting more knowledge (Willingham, 2006).

Shift in Reading Materials

Probably one of the more pronounced changes in these new standards that you will recognize is the shift in elementary curriculum materials to reflect a more equitable mix of literary and informational volumes.
texts. The revised publishers’ criteria for grades K–5, for example, call for 50 percent literary and 50 percent informational text in science, social studies, and the arts (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). By grades 6–12, it is anticipated that students will be reading an even greater balance of nonfiction (so long Shakespeare!—just kidding). The emphasis in all grades will be the mastery of grade-level complex texts and academic vocabulary.

This shift toward greater use of information text in many ways makes sense. Information or expository texts are likely to include technical words and a larger proportion of high-frequency academic words compared with narratives, making them more lexically challenging for young readers (Price, van Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009). In addition, there are genre features including glossaries, diagrams, and indexes that can assist in conveying more technical information that are important for students to learn (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003).

Furthermore, information book-sharing activities tend to elicit object-labeling routines in contrast to the more action-oriented routines in storybooks (Pellegrini, Galda, Jones, & Perlmutter, 1995). Finally, students will need to increasingly rely on information texts as they become involved in college and career-related activities.

Nevertheless, this shift toward information genre fails to recognize that many wonderful storybooks contain a great deal of information. The beautiful poetic features of books such as Chicken Soup With Rice (Sendak, 1962) teach children the months of the year in highly memorable, lyrical language. The classic The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969) delightfully captures the incredible metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly, while also engaging children in remembering the days of week. The charming alphabetic tale of Chicka Chicka Boom Boom (Martin & Archambault, 1989) sends a message about letters unlike any others. If we’re not thoughtful, these books and thousands of others might now be narrowly consigned to the genre type of “literary” text and potentially become far less prominent in reading programs.

To further complicate things, many of our most cherished books, especially in the early grades, blur the line between genres. They may be information books that also contain a storyline and a narrative structure that is most often associated with the genre of storybooks. These types of books often bring information to life for young children and become meaningful to them in ways that information books couldn’t possibly capture. It would be like trying to take the beautiful sentiments of the literary language, such as “some pig” in Charlotte’s Web (White, 1952), and replacing it with “pigs are omnivores,” the generic nouns associated with information text.

In short, although we need to understand the intention of these new Common Core State Standards and the important drive toward greater content knowledge for all students, we must be wary of the pendulum shifting too far in one direction. Content-rich instruction is important at all grade levels, and there are many different types of texts that can support it.

**Some Recommendations**

In our work with teachers and young children, we have come to use text sets, groups of texts that help to scaffold children’s ability to use information text. In recent years, we have engaged children in the life sciences as a way of integrating reading and science instruction. We will spend about two weeks on a topic, focusing on the vocabulary and content standards children will need to know (Neuman & Wright, in press). Gathering high-quality read-aloud books, literary and informational texts, we will engage children in reading-aloud experiences that increasingly introduce them to the features of information text. Using a recent topic about insects, here’s the sequence we use.

**“Content-rich instruction is important at all grade levels, and there are many different types of texts that support it.”**
Start with a predictable book—Predictable books typically have a memorable rhyming or repetitive word pattern that enables children to anticipate words, phrases, and events in the story. Although we traditionally think of predictable books for their literary language, many of these books also include academic terms and vocabulary that children will need to learn in subjects.

For example, we started with Eric Carle’s (1996) The Grouchy Ladybug, a delightful book about each hour in a ladybug’s life and the different animals it runs into on its journey. The pages are layered so that the child can see the different times on the clock referred to on each page. In addition to the literary language, children are introduced to words such as larva, pupa, molting, thorax, and abdomen, all in the context of the predictable text. Rereading this book several times, we find that children begin to remember and use these words in their meaningful context.

Try rhyming books—Rhyming books are especially helpful for children to hear the distinctive sounds within these academic words. In addition, rhymes often act as a mnemonic device, helping us remember key terms. For example, we use Have You Seen Bugs? (Oppenheim, 1996), which identifies all the key characteristics of bugs in colorful rhymes, giving children a more vivid account of certain terms through language more than specific features you might see in a photograph. For example, “But some bugs form a chrysalis or spin a fine cocoon, Where abracadabra! They grow wide wings in a magical changing room.”

Introduce storybooks—Informally, we’ve come to call these books, “genre-benders” because they serve a very important middle ground between storybooks and information texts. They provide information about our topic in a storybook format. These books also have fun with the topic and give students a chance to meet these interesting creatures in many new contexts. We read books such as Anansi the Spider (McDermott, 1993), the wonderful Ashanti tale, or Aaarrghhh! Spider! (Monks, 2007), a book with an unusual premise about a spider who wants to be endeared as a family pet, told with lively cartoonish illustrations.

These types of books allow children to play with the topic and provide wonderful opportunities for lively discussion. For example, we ask children, to their delight, “Why wouldn’t you want a spider as a family pet?” “Wouldn’t it be easier than having a dog or cat?” “Why wouldn’t your house be an ideal place for a spider?” In many ways, you’ll find opportunities to talk about different habitats in your conversation with children.

Information books—When children are engaged in learning about interesting things, they want to become more expert in the domain. Insects, it turns out, is clearly one of those topics. This is the time we capture their interest and desire to learn more. We find that information book reading at this point becomes deeper and more meaningful because children now have at least a beginning network of words and concepts from which to draw.

For example, our students became fascinated in learning more about ants, and to understand more about these amazing little creatures, we read The Life and Times of the Ant (Micucci, 2006). This book goes into a lot of detail about how ants communicate, reproduce, and survive and includes information on some predators, such as the ant eater and ant lion. It also looks back at the history of the ant, which evolved from wasps more than 100 million years ago. We find children so interested that they take to the iPads to find videos of some of the insects described in the book. Furthermore, these books have all the genre features we have come to associate with information text, including diagrams, captions, and a glossary.

Different Book-Reading Interactions
Combining genres in text sets gives children a rich opportunity to engage in learning the vocabulary, concepts, and information in many different contexts. In the beginning of our topic study, we focus more on helping children to develop the vocabulary and concepts associated with the topic. Our book-reading interactions often support more choral responses, typical of predictable
texts, in which children learn and repeat common phrases, almost in a collaborative reading of the story.

As we continue on the same topic and read books in different genres, the discussions become more open ended. We spend a good deal of time making intertextual linkages, comparing and contrasting across genres. These kinds of comparisons and contrasts can give you the opportunities to focus on the specific features of text, making children more sensitive to each genre.

Soon, you can ask more challenging questions in which children might engage in “think, pair, share-like activities.” You can ask children to explain to each other any new information they have learned or any “aha’s!” they have experienced given the new readings, along with specific evidence to support their views. Because you have given them a stronger background from which to form opinions, the conversation will reflect more unique—but discerning—points of view that are based on specific evidence and interpretation of text.

In short, text sets include multiple genres on a common topic that support students’ developing knowledge networks. Consider the following in creating these text sets:
- Books should include challenging vocabulary related to important concepts that stretches children’s language.
- The information presented in the texts—the vocabulary and concepts—should be accurate and extend children’s knowledge about the topic.
- Books should include a certain degree of overlap in vocabulary and concepts to support practice and review.
- Books should be challenging but achievable; read-aloud books can always be a grade level or two above children’s current reading level.

No doubt, the implementation of the Common Core State Standards will be challenging in the years ahead, and surely there will be bumps along the road. However, if we stay true to the intention of these standards—to enable all children to become more knowledgeable through text—then these standards might be transformative in enhancing educational equity for all children.

**REFERENCES**


**LITERATURE CITED**


