THE READING LEAGUE Vermont

TEACHING READING IN BRIEF

WRITING IS COMPONENTIAL

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Key Decision Making in the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: An Interview with Susan Pimentel and Meredith Liben

Conducted by Sarah Hines Birgé, M.A.



Susan Pimentel led the development of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy. She is the founding partner of StandardsWork and Student Achievement Partners. Ms. Pimentel was a chief architect of the American Diploma Project, whose goal was to close the gap between high-school and postsecondary expectations. Susan also served two terms on the National Assessment Governing Board.



Meredith Liben was a chief writer of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy. She led literacy and ELA initiatives at Student Achievement Partners as well as taught elementary, middle, and high school for over 25 years in public and private schools. She is the co-author of two books, *Know Better, Do Better: Teaching the Foundations so Every Child Can Read* and *Know Better Do Better: Comprehension.*

We knew that students needed to be able to talk about what they were reading and learning. – Susan Pimentel

This year's series of ***Teaching Reading in Brief*** focuses on teaching and assessing writing. We take a componential approach, since writing is a composite, rooted in many foundational and metacognitive skills. Reading researchers interviewed in the series have repeatedly stated that **writing is one of the most challenging tasks asked of students**.

In the early 21st century, no other document informed writing instruction more than the **Common Core State Standards** (CCSS). Although the CCSS is sixteen years old, these Standards remain the curricular bedrock in districts and states throughout the country, including Vermont.

Our three goals of this interview are:

(a) to illuminate the research that led to the development of the CCSS English Language Arts Standards,

(b) to understand key decisions regarding these Standards' organization and implementation, and

(c) to help us consider the CCSS landscape today.

Sarah Hines Birgé: Please tell us about your background, particularly what brought you to reading science.

Susan Pimentel: I've been in education for about half a century. I started as a PreK-3 teacher decades ago, but then I attended law school, which is really where I learned to read complex text closely because every word counts when you're reading case law. I returned to education to work in Prince George's County (MD) with an innovative school superintendent, John Murphy. In the early 1990s, I began developing standards when Murphy, then in Charlotte (NC), asked me to create sets of standards across all subjects. After extensive collaboration with teachers and college professors from the area, we developed grade-specific standards that, once approved, became the foundation of the local education system. Murphy believed every child deserved the best education, and teachers should therefore teach all students to meet the standards' challenges. The standards received some national buzz, perhaps because they were grade-specific and reflected college demands and what other nations required of students. From there, I began working on standards around the country, principally in ELA and history and social studies, that the Fordham Foundation and the AFT [American Federation of Teachers] hailed. That led me to lead the development of the Common Core State Standards for the nation. Throughout, I worked closely with teachers and administrators in districts around the country, because it was important to have my feet on the ground, be in direct touch with teachers, and hear what students needed.

Meredith Liben: I taught in K-12 classrooms for twenty-six years, the last seven of which were right here in Vermont teaching English to 11th and 12th graders at Randolph [VT] Career and Technical Center. David Liben and I learned about reading most intensively in the K-8 school we started in Harlem. We tell lots of stories about what we learned about reading – much of it the hard way – in our two books *Know Better Do Better* (2019, 2024).

It was while I was teaching in Randolph that I got "drafted" to work on the Common Core State Standards, based on our successful work on reading in our school in New York. Once the

Common Core Standards were published, we did a lot of national work on the shifts required to implement them. We worked with teachers, publishers, states, and districts for the past fifteen years or so since the standards were published.

SHB: Could you tell us briefly about your specific role with the development of the Common Core ELA standards? You've touched on them, but like what would that be like a smaller grain size?

SP: I led the effort. I oversaw the entire ELA standards development process, including creating Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards and Glossary of Key Terms and Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Sample Performance Tasks, both of which were important additions to the standards. Appendix A presents the research behind key elements of the standards, and Appendix B showcases a series of complex text exemplars.

SHB: Could you tell us more about the purpose of Appendix B?

SP: Initially, we wanted to offer a suggested reading list to schools around the country, but that proved unrealistic. Our education system is primarily controlled at the state and local level. A national reading list, even a suggested one, wouldn't fly. Still, we wanted to show people guideposts, the level of complexity, quality, and range of texts required by the standards at every level of learning. Based on a 2006 report published by the ACT Education Corporation, ACT's Reading Between the Lines, we knew it was imperative for students to regularly practice reading texts in K-12 to enable them to comprehend texts they would encounter in college and on the job. ACT's research clearly indicated that a reader's ability to handle the demands of complex text by wielding evidence was the distinguishing characteristic separating someone prepared to meet the demands of higher education and a range of careers from someone who was not. At the time, however, few in education were thinking about the complexity of texts in instruction. Leveled-text instruction was widespread, based on the mistaken belief that providing students with texts at a supposed "just right" reading level, and then restricting them to reading only texts at that level, was beneficial. For the record, that belief is completely unfounded. For example, although I have a law degree and am a strong reader, give me something to read about the black hole in physics, and I'm lost. Why is that? Because I don't know the vocabulary or understand much about the concepts behind it. That doesn't make me a bad reader; it makes me a reader who needs to know more about black holes. The whole notion of leveling students is just plain wrong, and it has been proven so. In the Common Core Standards, one of the chief ideas was that all students should regularly read complex texts for their grade and then increase that complexity as they move up the grades so they are prepared for their post-

We were asking for a huge sea change. Insisting that all students have access to grade-level complex text shook up the entire education system!
– Susan Pimentel

secondary endeavors. Now, what does complexity look like? In short, our team started with what we knew students would have to read in college, and worked backward from there. We were asking for a huge sea change. Insisting that all students have access to grade-level complex text shook up the entire education system!

SHB: When I was hired at Leland and Gray High School (Townshend, VT), I had been teaching overseas when Common Core was published. My principal told me, this is the Common Core; this is what we're doing. Talking about text complexity was a big part of implementation. Meredith, what stood out for you when you were developing the Common Core?

ML: The standards were commissioned by the National Governors Association (NGA) and their state education leadership branch, the CCSSO [Council of Chief State School Officers]. They expected us to bring drafts of the standards for feedback to every conceivable constituency. Everybody got to weigh in. Eventually, the Anchor Standards, which I consider the meta standards, were published in June 2010. Though this seems naive now, David [Liben] and I both thought the Anchor Standards would be the whole project. The idea was to (a) increase text complexity annually after 2nd grade, and (b) increase the demand for students to demonstrate evidence of their comprehension of increasingly complex text. This increased complexity was the accelerant of learning. Essentially, what a comprehending reader does in kindergarten, even when they're processing orally, is the same thing a law student does if they're reading successfully. That work increases in sophistication and the ability to glean deeper meaning, but the processes and means themselves don't change.

SP: Just the Anchor Standards alone didn't fly with the states or their teachers.

ML: No, I know that now. Though David and I didn't see the need for the entire granular grade-by-grade breakdown of the Anchor Standards, they were needed for assessing student outcomes. Think again about who was commissioning these standards – the CCSSO and state governors. They needed to know how their students were doing. Then think of the assessment industry waiting for these new standards to take hold so they could make a whole new bunch of assessments.

So that dream didn't fly. At first, we were shocked. We said, "This is it. These [Anchor Standards] are great." And you know what? That would've really signaled the idea that the standards were targets, not what you teach. That caused a lot of confusion, confusion that continues to this day. Instead, everybody thought you dissected the standards and kept asking questions about them, or even made questions from them, like they were sentence stems. States demanded that publishers do that, so there's been this pernicious, self-fulfilling paralysis around the notion of the standards themselves being the means, not the ends. If somehow we could have a national megaphone, and could go back sixteen years and prevent that from happening, I think we would be in a different

place now. I wish stakeholders had heard us when we talked about the instructional shifts,* when we said, "This is what you do differently to achieve these elegant standards." We did try, but for the most part that truth fell on deaf ears.

SP: There's a difference between ELA standards, on the one hand, and math standards on the other. Math standards have a research-backed precision, prescribing the teaching of specific skills in a logical sequence: teach this skill in 1st grade, build on it in the next, and so on. But in ELA – except for the foundational reading standards – there was a dearth of real research linking specific standards to particular grades. What matters is that the standards build on each other and grow in rigor as students advance through the grades, and that the progression makes sense. We defined a beginning level, then defined what students would need to succeed in college and careers. We then outlined a sequence of student expectations to connect those two points, that is, the beginning and the graduation levels. That's when we realized the anchor standards wouldn't be enough. Teachers demanded grade-level markers: By the end of the school year, what do I ensure that students can understand and do?

ML: I wanted to go back to another piece of research that was interesting and influential. It really came into play when we were doing the text complexity work [to establish what level of text would be appropriate to aim for at different grade bands: 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-CCR]. The company MetaMetrics had been Lexiling books forever. They "Lexiled" readers, too, but we didn't talk to them about that. We were just interested in Lexiles for books – what they knew about the complexity of what students across this country were actually reading. Turns out they knew a lot.

The researcher had consistently seen, regardless of the subject, that the texts students were reading across the board in high school were approximately four grade levels lower, about 350 Lexiles, below typical entry level of college or job entry demands (Williamson, 2006). This was the level of complexity of your Joe Average textbook or anthology: arborist handbooks, cosmetology manuals, ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery], as well as textbooks commonly found in introductory college courses. What prevented students' understanding on the ACT? It wasn't their ability to answer the main idea. Instead, it was the difficulty in grappling with

*__Key Shifts in English Language Arts__

(1) Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language

(2) Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational

(3) Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers (2010)

complex syntax and vocabulary. MetaMetrics was saying, how can we send kids off this way? Congratulations, you graduated! But then they get this sharp upward lurch in late August or September. The message was, smooth out text complexity, start sooner, and raise student reading expectations. Respect who our kids are. That was what we dubbed the "Ladder of Text Complexity."

SP: We heard from people across the country who said, "I teach science (or social studies), and my students can't read the class textbook – they complain it's too hard to understand. What can I do?" In addition to the full range of literacy research we reviewed, we looked across the seas to see what other countries were doing and what they expected. What are Japan, Taiwan, England, or France requiring of their students?

SHB: Thinking about the research that informed the Common Core, would you talk about any other research that was a major contribution, specifically the Speaking, Listening, and Language Standards?

SP: We knew that students needed to be able to talk about what they were reading and learning. Two major areas of research guided the development of the Speaking and Listening Standards. One was over a quarter-century of research emphasizing the importance of knowledge building for strong comprehension (Cervetti, Wright, & Hwang, 2016; Dochy, et al., 1999; Kintsch, 2013). The first standard in the Speaking and Listening Standards asks students to collaborate – to talk and share about what they're reading and learning. Research shows that's how students can build and extend their knowledge nd understanding (Murphy et al., 2009). When they hear their peers put into words what they're learning and reading, it expands their own thinking. That collaboration is essential to developing students as thinkers. The second area of research concerns building strong social-emotional skills. Students need to be active participants in their learning with their classmates, not silent, passive learners (Applebee et al., 2003; Goldenberg, 1991). They need to engage actively and learn how to talk with one another.

Sometimes the Language Standards are crucial when you're speaking, and other times they are less so. What's key is knowing my audience and adjusting my language as needed. We didn't mention the Language Standards *per se* in the Collaborative Work Standard (see below) because we didn't want students to get hung up on things like speaking in complete sentences, using correct pronouns, or noun-verb agreement. We wanted students to focus on what they were learning and what they were curious about.

The Language Standards come into play in the second half of the Speaking and Listening Standards because sometimes the audience requires – or it is best that – the speaker uses standard English. Other times, if one speaks too formally, you could lose your audience. We mentioned the importance of reviewing the specific expectations of the Language Standards there. I hear you saying that people are forgetting about the Language Standards. Still, they're

Speaking & Listening Standards-Comprehension and Collaboration: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1

Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

explicitly listed right there in the Speaking and Listening and Language Standards, and referenced in the Writing Standards.

SHB: It sounds like a lot of these were holistic discussions that arose out of rich conversations about teaching and learning, but were there bodies of research that really drove this? Where did those come from from a research standpoint?

SP: We drew on a body of research to develop these standards. A key insight is that we should avoid making students passive or isolated learners (Goldenberg, 1991; Murphy et al., 2009)

Editors' note: Grade 1 is featured here as an example of the breadth and depth of student learning expected. See https://www.thecorestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/ for all CCSS Language Standards in grades K–12.

English Language Arts Standards » Language » Grade 1

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1 Conventions of Standard English: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.a	Print all upper- and lowercase letters.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.b	Use common, proper, and possessive nouns.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.c	Use singular and plural nouns with matching verbs in basic sentences (e.g., He hops; We hop).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.d	Use personal, possessive, and indefinite pronouns (e.g., I, me, my; they, them, their, anyone, everything).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.e	Use verbs to convey a sense of past, present, and future (e.g., Yesterday I walked home; Today I walk home; Tomorrow I will walk home).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.f	Use frequently occurring adjectives.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.g	Use frequently occurring conjunctions (e.g., *and, but, or, so, because*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.h	Use determiners (e.g., articles, demonstratives).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.i	Use frequently occurring prepositions (e.g., *during, beyond, toward*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.1.j	Produce and expand complete simple and compound declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences in response to prompts.

Grade 1 Language Standards continue on the next page.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.a	Capitalize dates and names of people.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.b	Use end punctuation for sentences.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.c	Use commas in dates and to separate single words in a series.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.d	Use conventional spelling for words with common spelling patterns and for frequently occurring irregular words.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.2.e	Spell untaught words phonetically, drawing on phonemic awareness and spelling conventions.
Knowledge of Language: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.3(L.1.3 begins in grade 2)	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grade 1 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.a	Use sentence-level context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.b	Use frequently occurring affixes as a clue to the meaning of a word.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.4.c	Identify frequently occurring root words (e.g., *look*) and their inflectional forms (e.g., *looks, looked, looking*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.5	With guidance and support from adults, demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.5.a	Sort words into categories (e.g., colors, clothing) to gain a sense of the concepts the categories represent.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.5.b	Define words by category and by one or more key attributes (e.g., a *duck* is a bird that swims; a *tiger* is a large cat with stripes).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.5.c	Identify real-life connections between words and their use (e.g., note places at home that are *cozy*).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.5.d	Distinguish shades of meaning among verbs differing in manner (e.g., *look, peek, glance, stare, glare, scowl*) and adjectives differing in intensity (e.g., large, gigantic) by defining or choosing them or by acting
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.1.6	Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts, including using frequently occurring conjunctions to signal simple relationships (e.g., *because*).

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Writing is necessary. Writing is expected. Writing is the human expression of thought. Writing is liberating. Writing can feel hard. Writing can feel complex.

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Discussion-based lessons create opportunities for students' conceptual, linguistic, and social-emotional development. Students whose classroom literacy experiences emphasize discussion-based approaches internalize the knowledge and skills needed to tackle challenging literacy tasks independently. Additionally, over twenty-five years of research indicates that broadening one's understanding of the world enhances comprehension (Dochy et al., 1999). How do you build this knowledge? You read, then write about what you've read. You talk with others about what you're learning from what you've read. Often, talking about what you've read before writing can solidify and deepen your knowledge before putting your thoughts and ideas on paper.

ML: The Speaking and Listening Standards were deeply influenced by the ELL [English Language Learner] scholars and community.

SP: The ELL experts cared about the Reading and Writing Standards, but they were deeply involved in the wording and expectations within the Speaking, Listening, and Language Standards.

ML: We believed that a classroom teacher would integrate everything [in terms of the standards]. I tallied where vocabulary is directly mentioned in the standards, and found it in about 18% of ELA standards. It's everywhere. We were fighting to integrate (and not segregate) these different skills. Don't forget, we were coming out of a world where there was a writing workshop period and a reading workshop period, and never the two would meet.

SP: You have a question about why the Language Standards appear last in the standards. Perhaps this story will help clarify why the standards are structured as they are. When we advanced our first draft of the standards, we didn't want to split them into the domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language standards. In our first attempt, we tried to mash them all together. We tried to show how everything connected to everything else, but that draft bombed, big-time. Educators across the country told us this was confusing and incoherent. Teachers didn't know what to do with it. I was called into our CCSSO/NGA bosses' office and told to get the standards fixed. So, in our next iterations, we divided the standards into four separate yet recognizable domains, one domain had to come first, and one had to be last, but they're all important, or they wouldn't have been included. Intentional redundancy is baked into those domains within each grade. For example, Listening Standards are frequently mirrored in the Reading Standards. Standards that name levels of literacy in written expression parallel the Speaking Standards. Word awareness and vocabulary appear in all four domains to indicate the central role words play in literacy. Using evidence to support inferences, claims, and conclusions appears in the Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening Standards. Text complexity is integrated throughout the domains.

They had consistently seen, regardless of the subject, that the texts students were **reading across the board in high school were approximately four grade levels lower**, about 350 Lexiles below typical entry level of college or job entry demands. – Meredith Liben

SP: We wanted to show that when you're writing, you're using some of the Language Standards. When you're speaking, you're also using some of the Language Standards. When you're reading, you're even using some of the Language Standards to understand syntax and vocabulary. These domains aren't isolated; they are interconnected, overlapping, and relying on one another. You can't think about the Reading Standards without also considering the Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language Standards together.

We worked to create these "rivers" that run through and across the four domains of the standards to show how they connect, but that doesn't always mean teachers connect them in practice as often as they should.

SHB: Oral language is the basis of reading and writing, and yet the Language Standards are listed third, after Reading and Writing, and then on the Common Core ELA website, Language is listed sixth. What was the thinking behind this decision, and most specifically, why were the Reading Standards first?

SP: Reading was placed first because when folks talk about ELA, they often reduce it to reading. Reading is central to literacy. As the core of literacy, reading is essential for knowledge building. While listening certainly contributes, extensive reading is necessary. The lingering influence of the "whole language" approach was still alive and well in too many classrooms, creating another imperative to prioritize Reading Standards to ensure students received proper learning-to-read instruction. The Foundational Reading Standards operate much like the math standards – they offer detailed guidance for daily instruction and outline the sequence for teaching students how to read. Based on longstanding reading research, the Foundational Reading Standards build on each other year after year, progressing steadily toward proficiency and fluency. While students are being taught to read, the Foundational Reading Standards and the phonetic sequences reign supreme. The nationwide perception of a reading crisis helps explain why reading was placed first. And remember, something had to come first.

I guess we could have created a circle of domains with literacy at the core and spokes radiating from it, but people had been emphatic: "Give us something we can understand." Writing depends heavily on reading, and speaking does too, but you also need language skills. What's most important? We need all four domains to be literate.

ML: I would also add that they're K-12 standards. Applicable to every grade K-12 would be that reading comprehension and writing proficiency are the ultimate outcomes schools should be working toward.

SP: We got real pushback for not putting the Foundational Skills Standards first. In retrospect, I kind of wish we had, because I do think some may have interpreted their placement as permission to neglect them. But why include something in the standards that you're meant to ignore? You wouldn't. We didn't. We went back and forth about their placement and ultimately decided to put them after the K-12 Reading Standards

Leveled-text instruction was widespread, based on the mistaken belief that providing students with texts at a mythical "just right" reading level, and then restricting them to reading only texts at that level, was beneficial...

since they are essential foundations for K-3 students.

SP: I don't quite understand what is meant by, "They're just ignoring the Language Standards," especially since the Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening domains reference them. Reading requires students to show evidence. Well, how are you going to do that? You're going to write your evidence or speak it. When you're writing, you use the Language Standards. And you must be able to write about what you read so others can understand. That's why instruction in the Language Standards matters. As noted, connections among the four domains run throughout the standards. I don't quite understand how (or why) people can ignore the Language Standards or the Reading: Foundational Skills Standards.

SHB: I think there's some confirmation bias. If I don't think the Language Standards are important, and then, if these happen to be at the end of the list, it aligns with what I went in thinking.

ML: I didn't have a role at all in how the standards were organized, but the embarrassing truth is we weren't worried about foundational skills, and that was a big mistake. David [Liben] and I thought foundational reading was settled science. We underestimated how much that view was still in flux. David would say that his deepest regret is that he didn't co-equally emphasize learning to read in the early years, when people were working to shift their teaching to take account of the Common Core. Before students can do anything but listen to complex text, teachers need to teach kids how to read and read fluently. That's our obligation as educators.

But people were stubbornly holding onto this idea that reading is natural and phonics is only for students with learning disabilities, and it was really damaging. This has hurt all of us in helping students achieve the ability to read at grade level.

After the standards were so widely adopted, we turned our focus to implementation for the next decade and worked with publishers – primarily on the [Common Core's] demand for evidence and complexity. That's what was most new and scary for K-12 teachers. How do you do this in 1st grade? Well, you read rich books aloud and then you talk, and the kids talk about the words, ideas, events, and characters in the book. You unpack the hard parts by reading them and discussing

... The whole notion of leveling students is just plain wrong and has been proven so. In the Common Core Standards, the idea was that all students should regularly read complex texts for their grade and then increase that complexity as they move up the grades so they are prepared for their postsecondary endeavors.

– Susan Pimentel

them together. What do you do with your own kids when you're reading something cool and rich to them? It's the same process in the classroom. Plus, the kids can do it together and build understanding in a way that enriches everyone.

SP: When we went around the country to explain the standards and assist with implementation, we prioritized the idea that students needed to read a lot and read a range of texts on a topic to build their knowledge and vocabulary. Another key priority was focusing on complex texts (and moving away from leveled-text reading instruction), which was deeply connected to the priority of building knowledge. We knew these priorities were a huge wake-up call for the field. We didn't devote as much time to the science of learning to read, assuming that most educators already had that down and understood its vital importance. As Meredith said, it was longstanding settled science.

ML: There's nothing radical in the Common Core's Reading: Foundational Skills Standards at all. But again, that was a mistake, given the voice we had at the time.

SHB: Hindsight's always 20/20, right? Given that the Language Standards haven't received the same attention as those in Reading and Writing, what do you think is the path forward for greater implementation of those standards, such as English conventions, grammar, language use, and vocabulary acquisition?

SP: Appendix A [the research section of the CCSS] summarizes how the Language Standards work across the grades, which could be useful for teachers. The chart in that Appendix highlights the most important language skills students need to learn. This could help teachers understand how best to integrate the grammar standards into their teaching. I'll also add that students need to write a lot, every day in some way – even in small amounts. That way, they become attentive to what sounds and feels right and learn to use verb tenses, pronouns, etc., correctly. Consistent practice also gives students opportunities to receive regular feedback on grammatical errors.

ML: *The Writing Revolution* (Hochman & Wexler, 2024) has lots of exercises at the sentence level that are excellent and focus on the meaning [and purpose of] using grammatical forms. I've used those exercises with reluctant writers for decades and found they do more to demystify how to write than anything else I've encountered. I don't want to discount the Language Standards at all. I'm not sure how people are having students write and not pay attention to the Language Standards.

It seems illogical to require students to write an opinion piece without addressing fundamentals like subject-verb agreement and other obvious language conventions, like the vocabulary needed for expressive and receptive communication.

– Susan Pimentel

SHB: As someone who did not receive any grammar instruction in English in my schooling, I would share that what I knew about grammar came from instruction in other Romance languages. So when I started teaching, I felt like I had no idea what this was. I needed to educate myself.

A big shift in the Common Core was moving the focus away from recommended curriculum, like specific works of literature and lesson plans and instead moving it towards student outcomes. Why was it developed this way? Has this approach been effective for teacher preparation and for improving student reading and writing?

SP: Our education system is primarily controlled locally, with the state playing a supporting role, especially in curriculum decisions. We had no way to propose a curriculum. No way. That was not happening. By emphasizing required achievements aligned with college and career demands, the standards provide teachers and curriculum developers flexibility in how they achieve these goals. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as best supporting their students' success. We did showcase a list of text exemplars, in part to illustrate complexity and to show the breadth of great texts that students should read and have access to. But again, that is not a formal reading list. We created Appendix B: Text Exemplars and Performance Tasks to highlight the richness of complex texts, without constituting a reading list per se.

We want teachers to read the standards, know what their students deserve to learn, and then figure out how to teach them. Starting with a specific curriculum was not feasible, and frankly, I'm pleased that schools across the country have different curricular options to fit their needs.

ML: Even on Appendix B, which librarians created, getting permissions was a nightmare. That's why it's so archaic. We couldn't get the permissions for all copyrighted text excerpts we hoped to showcase, even though this would have increased book sales, because schools would be more likely to buy those texts, predicting they'd appear on future state tests.

In addition, I think Appendix B is somewhat compromised because the selections veer Eurocentric. There was a lot of criticism about that, but this was literally driven by permissions. We had a much richer list, but that had to stay on the table. We were forbidden by the CCSSO [Council of Chief State School Officers] and others from touching curriculum. And that makes sense. Curricular authority is clearly with states.

SP: When we completed the standards, right off the bat, many existing curricula self-stamped themselves as aligned with the Common Core, but that was not true – not even close. At that time, a complete overhaul or a newly built curriculum was necessary to be considered aligned. Did these existing curricula include regularly reading grade-level complex texts? Did they include activities that required pulling evidence from those texts? Did they have students regularly write about what they read? Publishers needed to start with these priorities and restructure the curriculum accordingly before stamping it as aligned.

SHB: I would love to hear a little bit more about teacher preparation and student outcomes. What was the impact on teacher literacy preparation?

ML: Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi said, "We are going to use this opportunity to improve student outcomes," and most of their teachers rose to the challenge. We worked with those states for the first several years after the CCSS were published. There was leverage in some places that leaned in and put pressure on teacher-preparation programs to pay attention to the standards. Others never did. I'll never forget snowshoeing with a professor who said, "These standards have nothing to do with us. These will pass. All these things pass." I don't understand why governors, who wanted the standards and pushed hard for them, didn't urge their state legislatures to use the power of the purse to support and incentivize real implementation. Or why more state departments of education didn't create fresh teacher-licensure tests that included the CCSS. Or expect higher-ed institutions to expose pre-service teachers to Reading: Foundational Reading Standards and the CCSS goal of educating every student. We tried. We showed people how successful Louisiana was in these areas, but this had a limited impact. And it shows to this day.

SHB: In the first* Language Standard, ELA Literacy L.K.1, *is letter formation. Yet the words handwriting, script, and cursive are not in the ELA Common Core. Today, despite ample evidence that fluent handwriting is a foundational writing component, a lot of students don't get explicit handwriting instruction. How did that happen?

SP: I understand how it unfolded. We knew the research. We never claimed that cursive was unimportant. Our experience showed that in the early grades, too many schools were spending excessive time on cursive. Instead of concentrating on learning to read, building foundational skills, and engaging in a volume of reading, including read-alouds and building fluency, too much emphasis was placed on cursive writing. The Common Core was intended to cover only 85% of what a school teaches. [Schools chose curricular content for the remaining 15%.] So we thought that, if we included printing and keyboarding, schools could also choose to add cursive back in, which many did. But we also aimed to send a message that teachers should be careful not to neglect other ELA priority areas, especially when we had massive numbers of kids who couldn't read. Reading remained a top priority.

SHB: In terms of understanding this 85% / 15% split, how should the Common Core be understood in terms of expectations for student handwriting?

SP: I know we intentionally omitted cursive, and when we traveled the country, we heard from several opponents of our decision. We had no objection to their objections, and said, "Add cursive if you want to – we get it." Several states did just that. It's not that we were against teaching cursive; we knew the research. We just didn't want learning to write in cursive to dominate early-elementary classes. The standards do require students to learn to print letters, emphasizing the importance of both printing and writing by hand for memory

retention of content they hear and read. That way, the content is more likely to stick in their brains. There are also keyboarding skills [in the CCSS], because we knew those were coming to the fore.

ML: My CTE [Career and Technical Education] students were self-conscious about their handwriting. I gave them time and encouragement to practice just their signatures so they would feel okay about how they signed their names. The lack of handwriting instruction predates the Common Core.

SHB: Keyboarding is a 3rd-grade Writing Standard, Literacy W.3.6, but in the earlier grades, it's not mentioned. On what basis was this 3rd-grade keyboarding decision made?

SP: There were two main reasons. First, schools faced resource constraints. At that time, students weren't using computers much before grade 3. We wanted students to stick with handwriting, though keyboarding could be introduced in grade 3. Now, some kindergartens are full of computers, with kids using them daily, and I question whether this is a good thing. But if you're in a state that requires students to respond to a test via keyboarding, you'd better incorporate keyboarding into instruction earlier. This is where I don't want people to lose their common sense. Adjust as needed.

If you put a test in first grade that requires kids to use a keyboard, you'd better outfit your schools with keyboards and teach students how to use them. But sixteen years ago when the standards were developed, we knew that wasn't the case. Today there might even be debate about including too much keyboarding too early, but if assessments require it, students should have access to the necessary tools.

SHB: At that time when you were involved in the development of the Common Core, what was the expectation for use of laptops?

ML: In some ways, the ELA Standards are sort of old school. They're about reading, writing, listening, and speaking, classic language arts, and not mastery of the myriad tech gizmos that we have now.

Equity was also a concern. If these standards were for everybody in the United States, then they were for the least-resourced schools in the Louisiana Bayou. They were for the reservation schools in Nevada, the well-heeled schools of Westchester County [NY], or schools with lots of transient students in the Central Valley of California. Resources and equity were an issue in most places. How are you going to demand that kids gain proficiency with tools their schools can't provide for them? We didn't anticipate then that cheap mobile laptops were coming into play and would become ubiquitous. At the time, some well-resourced libraries might have had laptops. At the tech center [where I worked], all we had were laptops on rolling carts to sign out. The computers in my classroom were low-functioning desktop machines handed down from the business program. They held discs. They weren't connected to the internet. We didn't have a crystal ball; it was the dawn of the internet age.

SP: Keyboarding was on the rise, and students had to learn to use it. But digital media exploded after 2010. It's legitimate to say the CCSS is completely silent on digital media, and that gap should be filled.

SHB: When you were drafting the standards and knowing they were going to be used for many years to come, were there conversations about textbooks and handwriting versus predicting that students would all be on the computer?

SP: No. We definitely thought students would be on a computer some of the time and that they should know their way around a keyboard and the internet. But we certainly were not thinking students would be reading books on a computer at all. I still think hard copies are valuable for students to hold, read, and engage with physically.*

ML: You can read and mark up hard copies and make the text your own.

SP: We didn't think computers would become how students would get all their information, or how they would put all their thoughts and information out through writing assignments, either.

ML: I'm not sure we would have elevated technology, given that we all were basically books, bricks and mortar people. I'm not sure it's doing kids any favors when they don't see print books.

SHB: To switch gears, the Common Core is Reading, Writing, and Language Standards for grades K-12. It also has Reading and Writing Standards in History/Social Studies and in Science and Technical Subjects. How, if at all, are teachers in history, social studies, science, and technical subjects responsible for teaching and their students achieving those standards?

SP: Teachers are responsible if a state adopts them. Teachers can immediately incorporate the Reading and Writing Standards into their history and science content standards, though many could benefit from the state offering professional development on how best to integrate them into their teaching.

Our CCSSO and NGA bosses initially advised us not to develop literacy standards in those content areas. "Don't do it!" they warned. "Don't write literacy standards in history and science!" We ignored them after hearing from state after state that these literacy standards were essential, not because science and social studies teachers needed to become reading teachers, but to ensure their students could read and understand their textbooks and other content-specific texts. Writing expectations differ across subjects like science and history. Students need to learn how. States urged us to develop these standards, so we proceeded despite the warnings. When we shared the standards nationwide, they were a big hit with most folks, though some content-area teachers objected.

*Ms. Pimentel is correct. See ***Teaching Reading in Brief***'s interview with assistive technology specialist Nanci King Shepardson (Vol. 7, No. 4) for research findings on reading hardcopy versus online text.

SP: I remember a phone conversation with a science teacher while we were gathering feedback on the Literacy Standards. They were not fans [of the Literacy Standards in social studies, science, and technical subjects]. The person expressed his disapproval, "I'm a science teacher. We don't read and write in science; we do labs." That sentiment was shocking to me. I responded, "What? My dad is a scientist. He's in his eighties, and he still reads and writes every single day." I figured that person was likely representing others' thinking, too. It's as if they said, "Well, reading and writing, they aren't our thing. Our thing is teaching science." Okay, but my question is, "How are you doing that?" Of course, students learn through labs, research, and lectures, but teachers need to understand that students are studying, reading, and writing in science class. Students must review the experiments they plan to carry out and prepare their lab reports. Science and history teachers should recognize that Literacy Standards can enhance their teaching by helping students access information from texts and research, write effectively, and adopt the specific writing styles required in their disciplines. Incorporating Literacy Standards into their instruction can help students master the subject content.

I don't know how much influence the Literacy Standards for social studies, science, and technical subjects have had across the country. It's unclear how many states actually require their science and history teachers to teach them. Some states don't have science and history tests, so there may be no way to track their implementation. If I led a state education department or a school system, I would convene my science and history teachers to familiarize them with the Literacy Standards and show how literacy instruction will help students understand the content. Then, through surveys or observations, I would assess how they're implementing them and what additional information they need.

SHB: According to the Common Core website, forty-one states and Washington, D.C., plus Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands, have adopted the Common Core Standards. In recent years, there's been a renewed interest in reading research and evidence-aligned literacy instruction. How have these two efforts been in alignment, and how have they been in conflict in terms of implementation?

ML: They're in utter alignment. I don't see any conflict. I think the standards have stood up well. If anything, the Speaking and Listening Standards probably have been elevated, because there's been good multilingual learner research that has elevated the wisdom, particularly of the vocabulary threads.

SHB: Given this increased awareness of reading science, what would you tell educators and decision makers about the relevance of the standards today?

ML: The Standards are still research-aligned, even given everything that's happened over the past 16 years. If this is a "regrets" kind of question, there are some things we wish we'd lifted higher, like reading fluency. But there's nothing that was a blooper.

SHB: Which is good to say about such a massive project that's had an international impact.

Distribution of Communication Purposes by Grade in the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework

Grade	To Persuade	To Explain	To Convey Experience
4	30%	35%	35%
8	35%	35%	30%
12	40%	40%	20%

National Assessment Governing Board (pre-publication, 2007)

The Common Core Writing Standards focus on discourse-level writing, writing in those three genres/text types, whereas sentence-level writing is actually in the Language Standards. This might account for why many teachers expect their students as early as 1st grade to write at the discourse level. We have some questions about this. Why were the interconnected Reading, Writing, and Language Standards presented so far apart in the Common Core? For example, when our school district, Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School, got Common Core training in 2012, the connections weren't apparent. Only the Reading and Writing Standards were emphasized. Could this be due to assessments developed in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act?

SP: When we established the Writing Standards for this discourse level, we wanted students to write opinions and narratives, even in 1st grade. We wanted them to begin thinking in these formats and to express their thoughts in writing. If I were teaching again, I would always review the Language Standards – both the grammatical and vocabulary demands – to determine what to focus on in students' writing and to pinpoint areas needing instruction. Understanding what makes a complete sentence is crucial, so I'm not sure why teachers would ignore the Language Standards. It seems illogical to require students to write an opinion piece without addressing fundamentals like subject-verb agreement and other obvious language conventions, like the vocabulary needed for expressive and receptive communication. That said, it doesn't mean students shouldn't begin thinking critically and attempting to write their thoughts down. But for anyone to understandwhat students are writing, teachers have to teach some basic language skills. I don't know why they'd ignore these fundamentals.

ML: Remember the standards indicate the end-of-year targets, and are not the means to achieving that target. Students need to read and write, and they need to learn about the world and themselves by reading rich texts, by writing about them and talking and listening to each other's thoughts about what they've read and learned. Those are the means. If you do all those things regularly, and you make sure all your kids know how to read with fluency, your kids will do fine on standards-based assessments.

SP: To add to that, the standards shouldn't be the daily goal of instruction. The daily goal should be for students to read complex texts, think about the ideas and concepts within them, draw evidence from those texts, and then share their insights through writing and collaboration. Standards mastery should not drive daily ELA instruction. Standards mastery is the end result of instruction, not the organizing force. Literacy accelerators in the standards prioritize securing foundational skills, expanding students' vocabulary through a volume of reading, broadening students' general knowledge of the world, guiding students to marshal and communicate evidence effectively in their speaking and writing, and cultivating solid reading habits through regular close reading of challenging, content-rich texts.

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About Susan Pimentel and Meredith Liben

Susan Pimentel is best known for leading the development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English Language Arts and Literacy, some of the nation's most highly regarded college- and career-ready standards. As founding partner of two nonprofits, StandardsWork and Student Achievement Partners, she has spent decades advancing meaningful, enduring education reforms—characterized by stakeholder buy-in—that champion proven tools to increase academic rigor and student preparation. Before serving as lead writer of the CCSS, Susan was a chief architect of the American Diploma Project, which worked to close the gap between high-school demands and postsecondary expectations. Susan also served two terms on the National Assessment Governing Board, an independent, bipartisan board that sets policy for the national assessment, becoming vice-chair of the body in her second term. Three of her notable publications include: "Why Doesn't Every Teacher Know the Research on Reading Instruction?" (2018 EdWeek), Reading as Liberation: An Examination of the Research Base (2021), a Student Achievement Partners publication co-authored with Meredith Liben, and "Reading Tests Are Out of Step with Reality. There's a Better Way" (2025), coauthored with David Liben. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in early childhood education and a law degree from Cornell University.

Meredith Liben has spent over 25 years as a classroom teacher. She has taught in elementary, middle, and high schools. Highlights of her work include teaching in Career and Technical Education and community college, as well as in designing and teaching alternative teacher-preparation courses in New York City and Vermont. Along with David Liben, her longtime collaborator, Meredith founded two innovative model schools in New York City. They joined other teachers to found New York Prep, a junior high school in East Harlem. Then, in 1991, they founded the Family Academy, the source of many of the stories in the Libens' books. Meredith played numerous teaching and leadership roles in schools, the majority classroom work in reading and ELA. Meredith was responsible for digitizing the successful humanities curriculum of the Family Academy, now represented in part by Readworks. In 2019, the Libens published *Know Better, Do Better: Teaching the Foundations so Every Child Can Read*. Their second book, *Know Better Do Better: Comprehension*, was published in 2024. For nearly a decade, Meredith led literacy and ELA initiatives at Student Achievement Partners. Her initial project was to coordinate the research studies that gave rise to and confirmed reliable and valid measures of text complexity. Projects were consistently geared toward providing teachers the practical knowledge and tools to support all students' access to grade-level literacy learning and outcomes. This remains the focus of her independent consulting work.

Meet the Team



Sarah H. Birgé, M.A. is from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom and studied English literature at the University of Chicago. She spent over a decade teaching English, ESL, and French in the Bronx, South Korea, and rural India, and spent time as the Vermont Agency of Education English specialist. Sarah is currently the lead for Tools for Teachers instructional supports at the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Perhaps most importantly, the theater kids always ate lunch in her classroom.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.



Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction.*