



Improving the Massachusetts English Language Arts and Literacy Standards: A Quick Reference Guide to Proposed Changes in 2017

In 2017 the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will consider adopting changes to the Massachusetts ELA/literacy standards in order to increase **coherence and focus, rigor, and clarity**.

Goal	Example of Proposed Change
Coherence and focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased cross-referencing among the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language standards helps educators make connections across the standards in their teaching.
Rigor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revised high school Reading Literature standards add the genres of literary history, biography, and criticism to expose students to different approaches to literary study and prepare them to write literary analyses, a common assignment in high schools and college literature and writing courses.
Clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New and improved glossary entries define terms critical to understanding the standards, such as “read closely,” “analysis,” and “metaphor.”

A Brief History of Standards in Massachusetts

Massachusetts was one of the first states to implement standards-based reform and is considered a national leader in developing rigorous learning standards with clear expectations for how students build knowledge and skills over time. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) first worked with educators to develop learning standards in English language arts and literacy (ELA/literacy), mathematics, and other subjects in the mid-1990s.

Since that time, ESE has periodically brought together educators to revise the standards, such as in 2000–01, 2004, and 2007–10.

The current ELA/literacy and mathematics standards were adopted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010. These standards incorporate the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) used by many states and include additional standards unique to Massachusetts. Massachusetts educators and scholars were influential in the development of the CCSS.

Now, six years after the last update, educators are again working with ESE to take another look at the standards and to make recommendations for their improvement informed by over five years of use by teachers with students in our classrooms.

The proposed changes also include more detailed information on the ways in which effective writing often includes argument, explanation, and narrative, to clarify that the intent of the standards is not to draw rigid distinctions between these three types of writing.

Key Elements of the Proposed Changes

Element	Why is it important?	What will the proposed changes do?
How and When to Read Closely	Reading closely focuses on determining what a literary text means by examining word choice and the structure of sentences. In English language arts classes, reading closely is a prerequisite to literary analysis. Reading closely often involves re-reading a passage several times in order to determine meaning—a useful practice to learn and one that skilled readers employ automatically.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed changes acknowledge that reading closely is most effectively applied to poetry or other short complex texts with multiple layers of meaning or to excerpts from longer complex texts. This method of analysis is not appropriate for reading an entire extended text, because it slows the reader and potentially leads her to miss an author’s overarching ideas while focusing on details of vocabulary and syntax. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed changes include content-specific examples signaling not just <i>how</i> to read closely, but <i>when</i> it is appropriate. The current glossary does not define all of the key terms in the standards related to reading closely. The proposed changes add to the glossary to clarify this concept.
Engaging with Complex Texts	College, career, and civic participation require people to read and communicate independently about complex texts. Students must have opportunities to engage with a broad range of high quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The current standards lack examples of effective practices for integrating reading, writing, and language skills and knowledge when engaging with complex texts. The proposed revisions include examples that reference an array of specific texts and describe how educators can integrate and use multiple standards in curriculum and lesson design. The current Reading standards identify three factors in measuring text complexity: (1) qualitative evaluation of text, (2) quantitative evaluation of text, and (3) matching reader to text and task. The proposed changes include more information on qualitative dimensions of text complexity.



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Element	Why is it important?	What will the proposed changes do?
Changes in two PK-12 Standards for Reading Literature and Writing	The current standards include two standards focused solely on applying knowledge of literary concepts to reading and writing. Educators said that these standards were too narrow and specific. As a result, these standards have proven difficult to implement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed changes incorporate the content of the two standards related to literary concepts within existing Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening and Language standards. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This new organizational approach reduces the overall number of standards teachers must teach each year. The change also creates a progression as students move through the grades, allowing them to acquire an expanded knowledge of literature and literary vocabulary (e.g., from words such as “story” in pre-kindergarten to words such as “aesthetic” and “satire” in grades 11–12).

FAQs about the Proposed Changes



1. Do the current standards place too much emphasis on informational text, at the expense of literature?

Well-written novels, short stories, poems, drama, traditional literature, and literary nonfiction have always been and remain the heart of a strong English language arts program. The Massachusetts ELA/Literacy Curriculum Framework includes standards and guidance that makes this point clear. English teachers have a unique responsibility to introduce students to high quality, challenging literature that reflects diverse perspectives. The standards do not dictate how much literary or informational text students should read in English classes.

2. Who is responsible for teaching students to read and write informational texts?

When thinking about the balance of literary and informational texts in middle and high schools, consider students’ experiences across the full school day. All teachers have a role in developing intelligent readers, and articulate writers and speakers in their subject areas. The framework makes it clear that literacy is a shared responsibility within a school. Students in middle and high school encounter informational texts in many forms in many classes. English teachers are the authorities on analyzing fiction, poetry, drama, and literary nonfiction. Teachers of subjects other than English are the authorities on reading, writing, research, and discourse in their fields. For example, a student should turn to a science teacher for models of writing objective experimental research, an arts teacher for models of writing music criticism, or a CVTE teacher for models of writing technical specifications.

3. Will districts have to develop new curriculum for the new standards?

Educators’ comments on the current Framework from a variety of sources all signaled that the standards could be improved based on lessons learned and noted the importance of ongoing implementation support, including opportunities for educator collaboration in developing curricular materials. Encouragingly, 98 percent of principals and 95 percent of superintendents responding to the Views of Instruction, State Standards, Teaching, and Assessment (VISTA) survey in Spring 2016 agreed that the current ELA/literacy standards set appropriate expectations for learning. The proposed changes to the standards build on a solid foundation and offer an opportunity to strengthen curriculum, but will not necessarily require new instructional materials.

Learn More. Get Involved.

You can help make the ELA/Literacy standards even better by reading the [Public Comment Draft](#) of the proposed new Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy and responding to the Department’s online survey. Your comments and suggestions will be taken into account in the final round of revisions, which will be presented to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in spring 2017.

The survey will be available from December 1, 2016 to February 17, 2017 at <http://sgiz.mobi/s3/Public-Comment-Draft-ELA-Literacy-Math-Frameworks-2016-2017>.

What are Student Learning Standards?

- Standards state what students should know and be able to do by the end of particular grades or courses.
- Standards are clear, specific, and measurable.
- Standards identify desired results rather than means. They leave room for educators and curriculum developers to determine how students will develop the skills and gain the knowledge expected.
- Standards are ambitious, providing a floor but not a ceiling for student learning.
- Standards progress logically and smoothly from grade to grade.
- Standards are coherent both within each subject area and across subject areas.