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# What Does College Writing Really Entail? The CCSS Connection to University Writing

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# What Does College Writing Really Entail? The CCSS Connection to University Writing

**Cover Page Footnote**

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## What Does College Writing Really Entail? The CCSS Connection to University Writing

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In April 2014, Joseph Robertshaw posted on the NCTE Teaching and Learning Forum a question commonly asked by English teachers: *What expectations do professors have of incoming, first-year college students?* Not surprisingly, a lively discussion ensued, with over fifty posts from college, high school, and middle school teachers who collectively called for increased independent reading, enhanced critical thinking and close reading skills, stronger grammar/punctuation usage, more complex sentence structure, and less emphasis on grades. These calls for increasing content knowledge and related skills were tempered by cautionary posts regarding bursting-at-the-seams class sizes, questions regarding the effectiveness of isolated grammar instruction, and the importance of overall student readiness. Of all the posts, the greatest number reflected a genuine desire to puzzle out in reasonable, concrete terms what “college writing really entails.” Respondents grounded their comments and queries in such foundational documents as *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* jointly published by the NCTE, NWP, and CWPA, as well as NCTE’s *What Is “College-Level” Writing?*

For the past several years, we have participated in conversations surrounding “what college writing entails” via campus-wide assessment at our institution (See “Helping Students Cross the Threshold,” “What Professors Really Say about College Writing,” and “Assessing for Change”) and, more recently, in workshops and conference presentations. Significantly, our assessment work as composition specialists regarding college-level writing has coincided with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which we have examined closely in our roles as English education faculty. This dual perspective as English educators and composition specialists has enabled us to see strong, noteworthy connections between the CCSS and college-level writing at our institution, so we offer here a brief overview of our assessment results before showcasing authentic samples of four college-level writing assignments. Both the overview of our

assessment results and the discussion of the college-level writing assignments provide evidence that the CCSS has the potential, as promised, to help “prepare America’s students for college and career” ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)). In light of that connection, we offer advice to secondary English teachers regarding both individual assignment formation and schoolwide assessment initiatives that strengthen the bridge between high school and college writing.

### **THREE OVERARCHING RHETORICAL FEATURES OF COLLEGE WRITING THAT ALIGN WITH THE CCSS**

Our local assessment of college-level writing focused on a university-wide survey of faculty with follow-up focus groups to determine what assumptions about “good” writing professors hold, what assignments they require, and what pedagogical strategies, if any, they use to help students become stronger writers. Our study reveals three major findings of special interest to English teachers who are working to align with the Common Core State Standards and prepare their students for college writing.

First, our assessment work reveals that “good” writing is a complex phenomenon that varies by discipline. Faculty across disciplines voiced differing preferences regarding, for example, active vs. passive voice, the use of first-person pronouns and contractions, and what constitutes evidence. Even more importantly, professors across disciplines value different genres (See Appendix A for a complete list of genres mentioned by faculty in our study). Arts & Humanities faculty, for example, are more likely to assign literary analyses, creative writing, personal essays, or historical and biographical essays, while STEM faculty are more likely to assign lab reports, marketing analyses, and data commentaries. Significantly, not a single professor named the five-paragraph essay as a college-level writing assignment or even identified it as a crucial stepping stone in learning to write for college--a common pedagogical assumption among high school teachers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, professors did not name extensive page length as a characteristic of college writing and rhetorical complexity.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “five-paragraph essay” in this article to mean the kind of formulaic structure in which form is valued to the detriment of analysis and creative risk-taking. Kimberly Wesley cites Thomas Nunnally’s 1991 definition of the “five-paragraph theme” (FPT):

As it is usually taught, the FPT requires (1) an introductory paragraph moving from a generality to an explicit thesis statement and announcement of three points in support of that thesis, (2) three middle paragraphs, each of which begins with a topic sentence restating one of the major ideas supporting the thesis and then develops the topic sentence

Second, our assessment reveals that professors view college writing as a developmental craft requiring time, practice, feedback, and opportunities for increasingly complex rhetorical tasks. Part of being “college ready,” then, is the right mindset: a willingness to embrace the temporary status of novice (Saltz and Sommers), regardless of how successfully one wrote in high school. This openness to intellectual risk-taking, curiosity, and embracing of difficulty reflects the eight *habits of mind* identified as keys to success in college writing by *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*.<sup>2</sup>

Third, our assessment work demonstrates the critical importance of the reading/writing connection. More specifically, college writers must learn to manage source materials in assigned writing, but “managing source materials” means far more than learning proper citation style or cherry-picking sources to support a strongly held personal belief or position. Instead, writing is a means of initially learning and then deepening understanding of course concepts that are typically introduced in required readings and reinforced in class lectures and discussion. As such, college writers must often read a complex article or chapter about an unfamiliar topic, which requires an ability to summarize accurately, perhaps while simultaneously analyzing the text in light of a related theoretical or conceptual lens or by synthesizing it with other readings. Thus, college writers are invited to enter an ongoing and unfamiliar “conversation,” as Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein advise:

Too often . . . academic writing is taught as a process of saying “true” or “smart” things in a vacuum, as if it were possible to argue effectively without being in conversation *with* someone else. . . . To make an

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(with a minimum of three sentences in most models), and (3) a concluding paragraph restating the thesis and points. (qtd. In Wesley 58).

While the explicitness of the structure makes it practical to teach and may be seen as an important developmental step in argumentation, Wesley argues (and we agree) that the FPT’s “emphasis on organization over content squelches complex ideas that do not fit neatly into three boxes. Students’ mere awareness that they must mold a topic to the FPT style inhibits their learning” (59). We will say more about the utility of the five-paragraph essay later in this article.

<sup>2</sup> The *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a joint effort by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP) defines *habits of mind* as “ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines” (1). The eight habits of mind are curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition.

impact as a writer, you need to do more than make statements that are logical, well supported, and consistent. You must also find a way of entering a conversation with others' views--with something "they say." (3-4; emphasis in original)

For college-level writing, then, "entering the conversation" through close reading and analysis is of paramount importance.

The key themes that emerged in our assessment of college writers--writing as a skill that develops with time, practice and feedback; the importance of close reading and analysis; and the varied nature of what constitutes "good" writing across the disciplines--are all reflected in the CCSS. We see the features mirrored in the vertical design of each anchor standard, as well as in the heavy emphasis on close reading, textual analysis, and research. Finally, the CCSS presume that all teachers--including those who teach social studies, science, health, physical education, and even math--share in the responsibility of developing the literacy of their students.

#### **FOUR COLLEGE-LEVEL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

To answer more concretely the question posed by our title, we showcase in this section four authentic, college-level assignments: a rhetorical analysis in a 100-level composition course, a case study in a 200-level business law course, a primary source paper in a 300-level history class, and a series of ten summary/responses in a 400-level capstone course in biomedical science. What makes these assignments college level? And how can secondary-level English teachers and their colleagues, with the guidance of the CCSS, best prepare their college-bound students for this kind of work?

#### **A Rhetorical Analysis in a 100-Level Composition Course**

*Your assignment is to choose an editorial on an issue of your choice from a nationally syndicated newspaper or magazine (i.e., Detroit Free Press, New York Times, Time, Newsweek) OR to choose an essay from a group presented by your instructor OR to choose an electronic essay (blog, webpage, or other resource approved by your instructor) and to write a four- to six-page essay in which you analyze the editorial using critical approaches we will discuss in class and then evaluate the effectiveness of the editorialist's argument. Based on your detailed analysis, you will decide whether the editorial is effectively persuasive or not. Although you may point out positive and negative features of the writer's craft, you must make some overall judgment about the effect of the piece.*

We begin with a typical assignment from a first-year composition course, a course that a majority of college students are required to take. The assignment asks students to select an editorial from a newspaper, essay collection, or online resource for the purpose of analyzing it rhetorically and writing an evaluation that explains the author's rhetorical effectiveness.

Three main elements distinguish this assignment as "college level." First, the objective of the assignment is a single text. *Close reading* is central to the writing task, which requires the ability to summarize accurately first. Second, the focus of the work is *analysis*—that is, students will study a text using various analytical tools (in this case, rhetorical techniques) and make claims about *how* the text is functioning. Third, students must write an evaluation that is justified by evidence from the text. They must interpret the effects of the author's choices on an audience and explain those effects logically and persuasively by citing examples from the text. The assignment goes beyond explanation (*What* the author does) to interpretation (*how well* the author communicated his or her argument?). In doing so, students are coming to terms with rhetorical concepts that they, in turn, are asked to embed in their own writing while also focusing on the analytical requirements of college-level writing.

One of the major findings of our research into what professors expect of their college-level writers is that close, analytical reading is primary in the literacy tasks college students are expected to perform, and the CCSS reinforce this critical connection between reading and writing. The object in the rhetorical analysis assignment is an editorial, but *text* can be defined in a variety of ways in the college classroom: students may be asked to respond to, interpret, or explain a lecture, a video, a webpage, an equation or proof, a lab experiment, a data set, or a case study scenario. As with the assignment above, students must be able to read complex texts, accurately summarize them, and then analyze them in light of theoretical or practical concepts in the course.

### **A Case Analysis in 200-Level Business Law Course**

*On the Facebook page, you will find posted a number of articles and two videos in regard to the case of "Association for Molecular Pathology v Myriad Genetics," which is posted on Blackboard and attached to this email. The court's opinion starts after the portion of the case document labeled "syllabus." Your assignment is to write a 2- to 3-page paper answering the following questions: (1) What are the facts of the case? (2) What did the trial court rule, what did the court of appeals rule, and what did the Supreme Court rule? (3) What are the public policy issues at*

*stake in this case? (4) What is your personal opinion in regard to what the court did? Answers to these questions should be based upon a careful reading of the case, as well as a close analysis of the articles, the videos, and class notes/discussion.*

We continue with a case analysis in a 200-level business law course, a popular class among first- and second-year college students because it fulfills a general education requirement at our institution. Like the rhetorical analysis, the case analysis asks college students to analyze an unfamiliar text by closely reading and summarizing key elements (the facts surrounding the case and the court rulings). Unlike the rhetorical analysis, students have no choice in selecting the text to be analyzed, and they must analyze it in light of additional source materials of the professor's choosing (lecture notes, class discussion, several articles, and two videos). According to the professor, the facts of the case (Q #1) could be summarized in a paragraph or two, the court rulings (Q #2) could be relayed in "one good, succinct sentence," and the personal opinion (Q #4) could function as a concluding paragraph. The gist of the assignment, then, appears to be the discussion of the public policy issues (Q #3). Here, the professor indicated class lectures and discussions pinpoint the crucial questions associated with the public policy issues that students would need to address, including the differing perspectives articulated in the articles and videos.

Three elements mark this assignment as a college-level writing task. First, reading and writing go "hand in hand." More specifically, to be successful, students must read closely and understand deeply a single, complex text in an unfamiliar genre with an unfamiliar topic, and then they must manage multiple sources regarding that text. This assignment, then, is far more complex than a traditional research paper that invites students initially to identify a strongly held personal belief that they then support by selecting sources proving that personal belief. Second, the assignment reflects a developmental model of literacy growth. The case analysis in this 200-level course is, arguably, more complex than the previously mentioned rhetorical analysis in the 100-level composition course, given both the complexity and number of source materials to be managed; however, the assignment is presumably less complex than upper-division writing assignments because the professor provides the relevant and credible source materials (rather than expecting students to locate and evaluate them on their own), as well as the four questions to guide students towards a narrow and manageable analysis (rather than expecting students to generate their own questions or criteria for evaluation).



### **A Primary Source Paper in a 300-level History Course**

*Find a document pertaining to witchcraft and between 4 and 20 pages in length on Early English Books Online (EEBO—see below for explanation). Write a 2-3 page (double-spaced) analysis of it, complete with underlined thesis argument and with footnotes (or endnotes if you prefer); you do not need a bibliography. You will need to include a printed copy of the document about which you are writing with both drafts. Your document print-out can have your own notes on it, or it can be a clean copy.*

Writing from primary sources distinguishes the work of an historian (like other humanities disciplines in which archival research plays a key role), so this introductory assignment from a 300-level history methods course titled “The Craft of History” represents the kind of analytical work one would expect as a student enters his or her major. For this assignment, students must locate their own primary source documents on a database and analyze them using the tools they have learned so far in the course. The instructor describes the task more fully on the assignment sheet:

Once you have chosen a document, read it carefully. Figure out what the author or authors was trying to communicate. Then think about the document in the context of the readings we have done so far in class and all that we have learned about early modern witchcraft and witch-trials. Come up with a thesis argument and a method for organizing your evidence. Then write your paper, following closely the writing and citation guidelines we have covered in class and in Rampolla’s *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*.

The task is designed not only to further students’ ability to construct credible arguments regarding historical events based on textual (archival) evidence, but also to enter into the conversation surrounding the history of witchcraft by using the tools of the historian’s trade: digital archives, previously published histories of witchcraft and witch-trials, and the conventions of historical writing. This discipline-specific task marks the work of “writing in the major” and is emblematic of the way students develop rhetorical complexity as they move from lower-division to upper-division coursework.

A feature of college-level writing we noted in our research is the discipline-specific nature of the tasks--not only do we see that most assignments are text-based, but they also emphasize a view of “research” that is very different

from the kinds of research we often ask students to perform in secondary schools. Here, students begin with a context or question (“what does the EEBO contain that would shed light on witchcraft in early modern Britain?”) and search the archives for texts that might help them answer that question. The answers to this question are complex and various, but they are specific to the work of historians.

Like the previous two examples, this assignment is text-based and involves making a claim based on the student’s analysis of the text and on the historical context (primarily via course readings). However, one could argue that the primary text itself demonstrates “increasing text complexity” over the college years: students must, in effect, transcribe the document (which would have been written in script) and “translate” the early modern English to understand the content as a crucial first step in the writing process; only then can they interpret the content to place the document in the context of a larger conversation about witchcraft and early modern British history. Here, increasing text complexity as a feature of the developmental nature of the CCSS is reflected in the difficult *reading* this assignment demands of the writer.

#### **Ten Summary/Responses in a 400-Level Bio-Medical Science Course**

*This assignment requires a close review and analysis of ten related professional readings assigned over the course of an intensive, three-week summer semester. Students were expected to read each article two or three times, to take notes as they read, and to research and report the credentials of the author(s), the “impact numbers” of the journal, and the meaning of unfamiliar terminology and concepts. In addition to conveying the author’s purpose and all key concepts, students were expected to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the article for future course use and to generate discussion questions for their classmates’ consideration during class sessions. The discussion questions might (a) seek clarification regarding a concept, (b) connect the new reading to a previous one, and/or (c) raise important issues for healthcare professionals.*

We conclude with a series of ten summary/responses required in a 400-level biomedical course entitled Vaccines: Science, Safety, and Society--a capstone course designed exclusively for biology majors in their final year of study. Like the previously mentioned case analysis in the business law course and the primary source analysis in the history course, this assignment requires that students review and analyze a single, discipline-specific reading; however, the biomedical assignment differs because it does not prompt a one-time, stand-alone

text constituting a major assignment. Instead, the assignment functions as an ongoing, unifying, and generative curricular feature designed to promote growing content-area knowledge and disciplinary awareness for the purpose of enriching the seminar-style discussions typical of capstone courses. The assignment requires that students identify and report key content found within the articles, but students must also research the author's credentials, evaluate the journal's credibility, and clarify unfamiliar concepts referenced in the article. Most importantly, students must consider how the readings (individually, cumulatively, and collectively) would prompt professional discussion among healthcare personnel who self-identify as biomedical scientists.

Three rhetorical features mark the summary/response assignment as college level. First, the assignment requires close reading and textual analysis of a series of single texts, so the interconnectedness of reading and writing is, once again, crucial. Significantly, the assignment invites students not to take a stance or stand firm on an already-held belief regarding vaccines, but instead to slowly, thoughtfully, and deliberately enter an ongoing, authentic, and professional conversation. Second, the assignment is discipline specific. Most obviously, students evaluate the credibility of each journal by analyzing its *impact number*--an agreed-upon scholarly tool in the STEM fields. Equally important, students are expected, as seniors in a capstone seminar and newcomers in their chosen field, to implement the knowledge and methods acquired during their undergraduate years to make informed judgments regarding the articles assigned for review. Finally, the assignment reflects a developmental view of literacy growth, with the rhetorical complexity stemming from various, overlapping elements: the range of complex, discipline-specific required reading; the highly distilled, "content dense" format of the summary/response; a grounding in the field of biomedical science; the cumulative nature of the assignment (in addition to other, equally demanding course requirements); and the overarching purpose, which is to propel students into an ongoing professional dialogue regarding vaccines.

## COLLEGE-LEVEL WRITING AND THE CCSS

The assignments showcased in the previous section are just four examples of college-level writing assignments; however, they individually and collectively illustrate the CCSS goal of creating students who are "career and college ready."

- The four assignments all illustrate ***how crucial close reading and critical analysis is during the college years***--a concept reinforced in both our assessment results and the CCSS. As English teachers know, the reading

anchor standards emphasize text complexity and the growth of comprehension, while the writing anchor standards connect writing and reading through an emphasis on research, manipulating and responding to texts, and on the centrality of writing to all forms of inquiry (see Figure 1). In fact, the introduction to the CCSS English Language Arts Standards notes the ubiquity of research throughout the CCSS: “Because of the centrality of writing to most forms of inquiry, research standards are prominently included in [the writing] strand, though skills important to research are infused throughout the document” (8).

- The four college-level assignments reflect that *good writing varies by discipline and that literacy develops over varied contexts*. Consistent with these four assignments, the CCSS require that writing take place not only in English classes, but also in all classes across the curriculum. As Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman note, “There is no question but that the CCSS emphasize writing (and reading) in the content areas, across every discipline. The message is clear that ... every teacher needs to be a teacher of writing” (110). Though no single CCSS standard focuses exclusively on writing across the curriculum, five of the eight qualities described in the section entitled “Characteristics of Students Who Are College and Career Ready” indirectly imply a WAC agenda and three explicitly state it:

<b>Reading Anchor Standards</b>	<b>Writing Anchor Standards</b>
<p><b>Key Ideas and Details</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</li> <li>2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</li> <li>3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.</li> </ol> <p><b>Craft and Structure</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</li> <li>5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.</li> <li>6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.</li> </ol> <p><b>Integration of Knowledge and Ideas</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.</li> <li>8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.</li> <li>9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.</li> </ol> <p><b>Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Text Types and Purposes</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</li> <li>2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</li> <li>3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</li> </ol> <p><b>Production and Distribution of Writing</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</li> <li>5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.</li> <li>6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.</li> </ol> <p><b>Research to Build and Present Knowledge</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.</li> <li>8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.</li> <li>9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</li> </ol> <p><b>Range of Writing</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.</li> </ol>

**Figure 1: CCSS Reading and Writing Anchor Standards**

*[Students] demonstrate independence ... [by] comprehend[ing] and evaluat[ing] complex texts across a range of types and disciplines.*

*They build strong content knowledge ... [by] establishi[ng] a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance. They become proficient in new areas through research and study. They read purposefully and listen attentively to gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise.*

*They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline ... [by] adapt[ing] their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline. (7)*

- Finally, the four writing assignments illustrate that **writing is a skill that develops with time, practice, and feedback**. Collectively, the assignments reflect increasingly complex literacy tasks, from a simple summary/analysis of general readings during the first year of college to a series of highly distilled, “content dense” summaries of discipline-specific readings in the senior year for the purpose of joining an ongoing conversation among healthcare professionals. This “growth model” is consistent with the CCSS’s vertical design, with students receiving feedback on a consistent basis while being challenged to accomplish increasingly complex rhetorical tasks in incremental steps with each new school year. Just like the CCSS for K-12 literacy growth, these four assignments illustrate literacy development throughout the college years and emphasize one of our most important assessment results regarding college writing: “Writerly growth requires time, productive mentoring relationships, practice/risk taking, and eventually performance” (Brockman, Taylor, Crawford, and Kreth 48).

## **LEVERAGING THE CCSS TO ACCELERATE LITERACY GROWTH**

*What expectations do professors have of incoming, first-year college students? How can we prepare those students for college writing? We hope the*

four college-level writing assignments help teachers answer these questions in two complementary, but ultimately, different ways.

First, we hope the assignments inspire teachers to assess their individual classroom practices. As previously indicated, the assignments align with the CCSS, but they also share noteworthy attributes that may be of special interest to secondary-level English teachers. First, each assignment prompts a short paper (good news for overtasked teachers), but none result in students writing five-paragraph essays—a crucial point worthy of special emphasis. Five-paragraph essays, by their very nature, require students to make claims and then list three separate reasons or describe three different elements, one after the next and usually connected by the transitions, *first*, *second*, and *third*. Each college assignment prompts writing that is too complex to be successfully squeezed into this restrictive rhetorical pattern. We acknowledge that writing-on-demand tasks, particularly those set up to elicit policy claims—*Students should attend year-round schooling to maximize learning* or *Our school needs new laptops for each student*—appear to be well suited to a thesis-and-three-reasons approach; however, these kinds of tasks are exceedingly rare in the disciplinary context of university coursework and college-level writing assignments. It's no wonder, then, that Campbell and Latimer claim that “the five-paragraph essay as college preparation” is a myth (8), citing several studies of faculty and students alike who claim the same.<sup>3</sup> Second, each assignment requires research, but none prompt a traditional research paper. Instead, the college assignments narrow students' attention to a single, primary text that is first read deeply for comprehension and then analyzed creatively in light of a framework or related secondary sources. It's this close reading and analysis of the text in light of the framework that generates the thesis.

Teachers interested in preparing students for college might consider reevaluating the importance of five-paragraph essays and traditional research papers and, further, consider exploring ways to adapt the common elements of the four college assignments so they are suitable for secondary-level students. For example, an assignment inviting students to list three differences between the print and film versions of a literary work (one difference in each of the three paragraphs) might be revised so that students select a single difference and then analyze how that difference impacts the narrative progression and final resolution. This approach more closely resembles a college writing assignment because the analysis focuses upon a single textual feature and students must apply it to an

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<sup>3</sup> See Courtney 2008; Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese 2010; Kidwell 2005; Moughtader, Cotch, and Hague 2001; Moss 2002; Ransdell and Glau 1996; Rorschach 2004; and Smith 2005.

overarching concept: in this case, the elements of plot. Likewise, an essay inviting students to identify three social issues demonstrated in *Hard Times* that are still relevant today might be revised so that students select a single social issue from *Hard Times* and then survey a credible news magazine over three months or the President's state of the union address over two years to learn how often the social issue is addressed. This writing assignment results in a short research paper (CCSS W.7) with a highly focused topic that can't be explored in a list of three reasons.

Focusing on individual writing assignments and isolated CCSS grade-level standards, however, is solely a first step. A crucial, second step is to look beyond individual classroom practices and leverage the CCSS as a means of programmatic assessment and, potentially, school-wide improvement. Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman note, "The most important reforms that a school system can make will be those that involve creating systems that support continuous improvement of instruction. . . ." (14). To this end, they recommend that colleagues work across disciplines and grade levels to look at current literacy initiatives and set goals for how to improve them; look at gaps in the curriculum and develop a long-term plan for reform; and focus on assessment as well as instruction (15-20).

To illustrate, we offer two innovative examples of local school assessment/reform initiatives inspired by the CCSS, especially its spiral curriculum, cross-disciplinary approach, and emphasis on reading. In the first example, one local high school brought teachers across disciplines and grade levels together during school in-service days to examine school data demonstrating that 9th graders who read on grade level tend to read below grade level by their senior year; and so they explored strategies that all teachers could incorporate and sustain to enhance reading instruction and promote reading growth. In the second example, elementary teachers in a grade 3-5 building used in-service days to analyze student narratives with an assessment tool based upon Lucy Calkins's CCSS-aligned "K-8 Continuum for Assessing Narrative Writing"<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, the teachers identified student achievement levels in narrative writing and clarified "next instructional steps" for subsequent years (Jensen, Romanski, Rauch, Pratt, and Benton 2015).

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<sup>4</sup> See the Columbia University Teachers College Reading and Writing Project website at <http://readingandwritingproject.org/>.



These two examples demonstrate that the CCSS invite English teachers and their department, building, and district colleagues across disciplines to enter robust, *ongoing* conversations that, arguably, parallel the four college-level writing assignments showcased in this article: close reading and analysis of a complex text (the CCSS) in light of credible and relevant, additional sources (district curricula, student writing, and assessment data) for the purpose of generating information and making strong arguments with supporting evidence. For teachers, that purpose translates into the important goal of accelerating students' literacy development, which Calkins, Ehrenworth and Lehman remind us is, above all, "the call" of the CCSS (14).

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## APPENDIX A: Documents that Faculty Believe Students Should be Able to Write

Below is a list of the types of documents that surveyed faculty believe students should be able to write upon graduation.

abstracts/summaries	entertainment reviews	executive summaries
advocacy papers	essay exams	experimental reports
analysis of factual situations	evaluative reports	personal essays
analytical essays/reports	explications of texts	persuasive letters
annotated bibliographies	expository essays	philosophy statements
argument briefs	goals and objectives	play/character analyses
argumentative essays	grant proposals	position papers
article critiques	historical/biographical essays	problem analyses
article discussions	homework policies	problem-solving memos
articles for publication	information sheets	process analyses
artist's statements	instructions	procedures
bibliographic essays	interpretive reports	program evaluation reports
book rationales	interviews	progress reports
book reviews	issue papers	project/program plans
business letters/memos	journal articles	project plans
business reports	journal critiques	project proposals
case analyses	journal entries	proposals
case descriptions	lab notebooks	questionnaires
case studies	lab/research reports	reaction papers
class management reports	language analysis paper	reflective essays
client assessments	legal arguments	reports for the public
clinical evaluation reports	lesson plans	research-based essays
clinical notes	letters to the editor	research proposals
commercial copy	literary analyses	research reports/papers
committee reports	literary interpretations	research summaries
compositions	literature reviews	résumés
correspondence	manuals	scientific papers
cost/benefit analyses	marketing plans	scripts
creative synthesis	mathematical proofs & arguments	short critical papers
creative writing	memos/emails	summaries
critical analyses	newsletters	technical analyses
critical assessments	news/press releases	technical descriptions
critical commentaries	numerical	technical papers
critical essays	analyses/explanatory text	technical reports
critiques of own teaching	outlines	term papers
data analyses	patient chart notes	themes
data observations	performance	theory analyses
dissections of arguments	responses/criticism	M.A. or M.S. theses
empirical research reports		