

# NSHS English Department's Common Core Implementation

By Brian Baron, NSHS English Department Chair  
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In March 2011, Massachusetts adopted a curriculum framework for English Language Arts and Literacy that is in compliance with the national standards known as the Common Core. What follows is an update on progress within the Newton South English Department to comply with these new frameworks. For the purposes of this document, the Massachusetts framework and the Common Core itself are used interchangeably.

## Reading

### *Where we are:*

The core of the Massachusetts ELA frameworks is evidence: citing “strong and thorough evidence of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” and analyzing “how an author’s choices . . . create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise” (Massachusetts). This emphasis parallels the emphasis on textual analysis in the NSHS existing 9-12 English curriculum, and is in alignment with the vast majority of reading standards.

### *Next steps:*

Some specific standards bear further scrutiny.

Standard 7: “(9-10) Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment” and “(11-2) Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.” The activities listed above are examples of the kinds of activities routinely asked of students at Newton South High School. They are not yet, however, part of the mandated curriculum, so there is not yet the guarantee that every student receives those assignments. One next step in Common Core implementation is to add these activities to the mandated curriculum.

Standard 8: “(11-12) Analyze a work of fiction, poetry, or drama using a variety of critical lenses (e.g. formal, psychological, historical, sociological, feminist).” Such analysis is assigned as part of the AP Literature curriculum, but has not been a regular feature of other courses. A next step in implementing the Common Core ELA frameworks would then be to add instruction in critical lenses to either the junior or senior year curricula.

The Common Core places an emphasis on literary non-fiction that has not traditionally been present in the NSHS English curriculum. For example, standard 10 for grades 9-10 reads: “By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range”

In response, the English department has taken the following steps:

- Piloted a short unit in the freshman year asking students to read a handful of articles about plagiarism and academic honesty and to write a persuasive essay in response.
- Developed lists of literary non-fiction that would fit with the themes of each year.
  - [Grade 9](#)
  - [Grade 10](#) (although one place in which non-fiction focus is strong is the sophomore speech unit and associate research).
  - [Grade 11](#)
  - Grade 12 is still in development. The curriculum consists of a number of different elective courses, thus making the task of creating such a focused list more time-consuming and challenging.
- Under consideration is making either autobiographies by Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs required elements of the junior curriculum.
- Discussion underway of the possibility of updating the final senior paper to have a more analytic, research focus, in line with the assignment at Newton North High School. (The current assignment is a lengthy personal reflection.)
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the freshman plagiarism unit and decide whether to continue or to expand its use.
- Decide how to ensure that serious study of some literary non-fiction, either from our lists or otherwise, is included in each year's curriculum.
- Make decisions about the inclusion of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs as core junior texts.
- Make a decision about changing the scope and nature of the final senior paper.

## **Writing and Language**

### ***Where we are:***

In the summer of 2011, a group of 6-12 English teachers from across the district developed a writing rubric that delineated expected progress as students advance in years. (See link [here](#)). The rubric is based on the six-trait model of writing (Ideas/Content, Organization, Word Choice, Voice, Sentence Structure, and Mechanics), and essentially puts the Newton curriculum in alignment with Common Core writing standards. In addition, the group selected several model papers, and made comments on them based on the rubric (the papers are available [here](#)).

In addition, the Newton English curriculum has a clearly articulated grammar curriculum and standards for vocabulary instruction that are in accordance with the Common Core.

### ***Next steps:***

In addition to having the clear written guidelines for writing instruction, the department needs to work on an ongoing basis to ensure uniform implementation. The conversation about what constitutes good writing is permanent and vital for the success of any English department, and certainly does not end with a written curriculum or even student model texts.

In addition, writing standard 3 asks students to “write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.” Most teachers assign some form of creative writing and personal writing each year, but aside from the senior paper and college essay unit, it is not a uniformly taught, core element of the curriculum. One next step in implementing the Common Core will be to make this common practice explicit.

## **Speaking**

### ***Where we are:***

English classes at Newton South routinely ask students to engage with course material orally, in accordance with Common Core standards. The curriculum also requires each freshman to engage in an oral reading to teach basic presentation skills, and each sophomore to research, write, and present a 3-6-minute persuasive speech as part of the sophomore speech unit.

### ***Next steps:***

- Many teachers assign some form of declamation in junior year, but the department needs further discussion about whether that should be a required element of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade year.
- Many teachers allow students to write and perform a senior valedictory speech, but the department is discussing whether that should be required of all seniors.

This is an overview of the current state of the English curriculum at Newton South. For further questions; contact Brian Baron, Department Head, at [brian\\_baron@newton.k12.ma.us](mailto:brian_baron@newton.k12.ma.us) .

## **Works Cited**

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy*. N.p.: n.p., 2011. Print.