

# COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

## New Common Core State Standards address lack of student literacy

By [Shaina Cavazos](#)

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### Three factors to measure text complexity



**Qualitative:** Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity and knowledge demands.

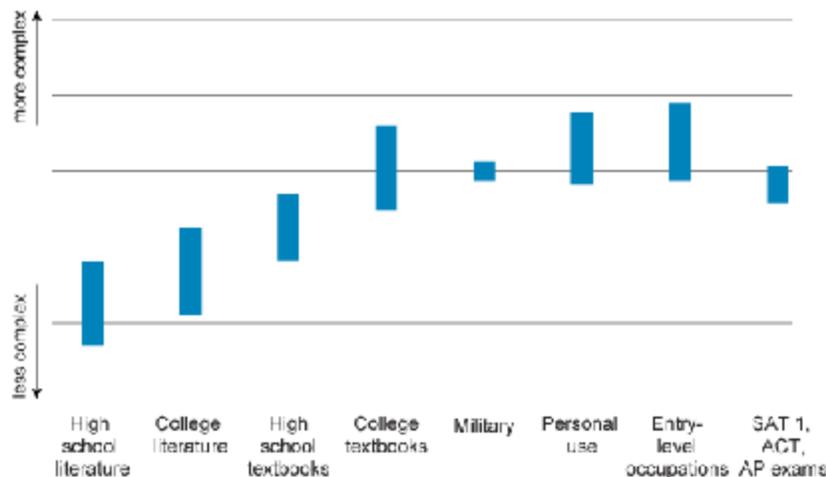
**Quantitative:** Readability measures that include obscurity of words, length of sentences and other scores of text complexity, called a Lexile.

**Matching texts to readers:** Determining variables in students in a class, such as motivation, knowledge and experiences.

### Text complexity of works at different levels

The complexity of texts in different areas are based on the Lexile Measure of books within the categories below. The Lexile Measure is found by analyzing word frequency and sentence length to determine how difficult the text is for a student to comprehend.

▲ The height of the bar represents the range of difficulty of the works in that category.



Sources: PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND COMMON CORE STANDARDS INITIATIVE

Missouri adopted the language arts Common Core State Standards in 2010, and the Columbia School Board approved a revision of district curriculum to align with the standards in June. Three factors were used to develop guidelines for teachers when choosing texts: qualitative aspects of the text, a quantitative measure called Lexiles

and a teacher's ability to match texts to readers. : [Christina Trester](#)

*Editor's note: The first in a series of three stories on Columbia Public Schools' new academic standards, this installment deals with how a lack of literacy in graduating high school students has helped spark the need for more rigorous expectations in schools.*

COLUMBIA — By the end of December, Columbia Public Schools will have revised its core subject area curriculum to better align with the Common Core State Standards, putting the district at the forefront of the changes surrounding the new academic standards in Missouri.

During the past year, the district has focused on making changes that stress a curriculum and instruction style based more on practical skills and in-depth learning, said Sally Beth Lyon, chief academic officer for the district.

Focusing on such skills might help lessen the race to cover as much content as possible in a given year.

The belief is that the more critical thinking, reading and writing skills students have, the more they can then apply those skills to other content areas, which could help address a growing national concern about student literacy.

A 2008 study by Gary L. Williamson from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction suggests that high school students are not literate enough in core content areas — math, English, science and social studies — to be successful in post-high school endeavors such as college, the workplace, the military or civic life.

"You've seen literacy explode and the demands for literacy explode," said Nick Kremer, language arts and social studies curriculum coordinator for Columbia schools grades six to 12. "And that hasn't been matched in your typical setting, K through 12."

With the new standards, ideally, former classroom staples such as multiple choice tests and traditional lectures would fall out of favor while exercises that develop critical-thinking and writing skills move to the top. Students will see more emphasis on collaborating and learning how to research and adapt to different kinds of problem-solving situations.

Finished in 2010, the standards are the product of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. These national organizations are trying to help bridge a gap between the current high school curriculum and what students should be learning to be considered college- and career-ready. States can choose whether to

adopt the standards, and so far 45 states and the District of Columbia have.

[Missouri adopted the standards, which cover math and language arts, in 2010.](#) The Columbia School Board approved a revision of district curriculum to align with the standards in June 2012. New science standards are forthcoming in 2013.

### **Preparing for higher expectations**

One reason a gap in literacy and real-world skills exists, Kremer said, is because schools typically emphasize primarily fiction reading, which doesn't line up with what businesses and colleges expect.

"We're not asking kids to read enough informational text," Kremer said. "What national researchers found is that especially at the elementary level, and even secondary English classes, is that 90 percent of reading is fiction-based, and when you think about the real world and the demands of the real world, it's almost entirely nonfiction."

Williamson's research shows that students who are achieving at an average level at the end of high school only comprehend about 50 percent of text once they get to college. Part of the problem, Williamson argues, is that high school and college stress different skill sets. In high school, it's what you know. And in college, it's how you know it or what you do.

Ted Tarkow, associate dean in MU's College of Arts and Science, said he sees students who are prepared and students who are marginally prepared — it depends on education and ACT scores but also on how much curiosity about learning they have.

The Common Core standards will only be successful if they have teachers who are ready to work with them and districts that can support them, he said.

"There's also going to have to be a clear education of parents, so that at home, kids do a lot more reading, going to the public library and reading for fun," Tarkow said. "You can't expect schools to be the panacea for all of life's ills."

### **Expectations after high school, college**

Results in the workplace, military and civic life are even more dismal: Students might only comprehend about 25 percent of texts there.

A 1991 report from The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills for 2000 was charged with analyzing the skills needed to be successful in jobs and getting that information to

schools. The report showed that more than half of young people did not have fundamental skills that workplaces and employers valued. Skills analyzed included resourcefulness, using technology, finding information and interpersonal skills.

Randy Plunkett, director of community and government outreach for Military.com, an organization that helps service members and veterans learn about resources and benefits available to them, said about 40 percent of people who take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery don't score high enough to be accepted into the U.S. military branches.

Although the score needed can vary by branch, Plunkett said qualifying scores might increase and decrease based on the needs of the military at any given time.

The examination standards are higher than they've ever been, and joining the military involves extensive practical and academic education as well as a certain level of maturity, Plunkett said.

A high school curriculum that has more rigorous standards will just mean better applicants and more success in the military, Plunkett said.

### **Skills and content**

Columbia Public Schools Superintendent Chris Belcher agrees that a balance of structure, rigor and a child's interest needs to be struck to help students be ready to be successful after high school and not "discriminate against" natural aptitude or abilities.

"Everyone has gifts and abilities," Belcher said. "What we do, is we beat up their love for learning. We don't let them focus on their strengths, and I worry about that a lot."

With a focus on practical skills, teachers should have more freedom to choose what they teach to best engage students and appeal to their interests, Belcher said.

Part of that, however, means choosing more readings and problems that involve real-life situations and nonfiction writing. While fiction can help pass along social values and knowledge, Belcher said, a business person is going to expect an entirely different kind of understanding and ability when comprehending a text.

"You can't debate about nothing; there has to be content," Belcher said. "Content really is anything we want to use to teach you how to think at a higher level."

*Supervising editor is [Elizabeth Brixey](#).*