

The mission and work of the Core Knowledge Foundation for more than twenty years has focused on creating materials and advancing instructional practices that enable all students regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status to become fully literate and contributing members of the American democratic system. (E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, 1988) In 2007, realizing that commercial publishers were unlikely to undertake the development of the kind of comprehensive language arts program needed to close the achievement gap, the Foundation sought philanthropic funds to create the Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) program.

The K-2 CKLA materials were, therefore, developed and field tested prior to the release and adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010. However, because they are based on the same seminal research as the CCSS, the K-2 CKLA materials in effect anticipated and embody both the letter and the spirit of those standards.

The alignment of CKLA with the CCSS ELA is readily apparent when the key features and components of CKLA are examined in relation to the Publishers' Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, K-2, as detailed below.

Key Criteria for Reading Foundations

- 1. Materials must meet the needs of a wide range of students, reinforcing key lessons in concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions of the English writing system.**

K-2 students receive 60 minutes of daily, systematic, and explicit instruction during the CKLA Skills Strand in concepts of print, phonological awareness, phonics, grammar, (starting in Grade 1), and writing. CKLA teaches the highly complex letter-sound correspondences of the English language in an explicit and systematic manner in Kindergarten – Grade 2. Students are taught how the 26 letters (or graphemes) of the alphabet are used in various combinations to represent 44 sounds (or phonemes). By the end of second grade, students have been taught over 150 of the most frequent spellings for these.

These skills are reinforced through extensive, distributed practice using workbook page activities and the readers that accompany each unit of Skills instruction. The stories in all K-2 readers have been written using the CKLA Decoding Database, so that only the letter-sound correspondences that have been explicitly taught are encountered by students in their decodable readers. Thus students gain practice and confidence with letter-sound correspondences that they have learned, with the occasional “tricky word” (sight word) also explicitly taught.

Throughout the Skills Teacher Guides, sidebars direct teachers to activities and materials to be used with students who need additional practice to achieve mastery of the specific letter sound correspondences. These materials are included in a “Pausing Point” section at the end of each unit. Teachers are encouraged to use these additional materials to meet individual students’ needs throughout the course of the unit, as well as to “pause” for several days as needed at the end of unit assessment before moving on to the next unit.

2. Fluency should be a particular focus of materials prepared for 2nd graders.

Each K-2 CKLA Skills unit provides opportunities for re-reading the stories/chapters in the student Reader. These opportunities are not left to chance, but are written into lessons as a part of the 60 minutes of Skills instructional time in each lesson. In addition, Take-Home copies of nearly all of the stories/chapters in each reader are included in student workbooks and are assigned as homework for additional oral reading practice.

Starting in Grade 2, end of unit assessments also include materials with which teachers may conduct fluency assessments.

3. Materials develop academic vocabulary prevalent in complex texts throughout reading, writing, listening and speaking instruction.

One of the distinguishing features of CKLA is the “Listening and Learning” Strand. While the explicit teaching of decoding skills in the early grades is absolutely essential, it is not sufficient to guarantee comprehension. The very features that make decodable text accessible to young readers, i.e., the use of short sentences with simple syntax and a controlled vocabulary, are the antithesis of complex text. However, as the CCSS rightly recognize, students need exposure to rich language starting at an early age.

This is accomplished in CKLA during the 60 minutes of daily Listening and Learning instruction during which students hear both fictional and informational text read aloud. It is well documented that the language in written text is far more complex than that typically used in conversational speech, even among adults. The Listening and Learning read aloud lessons include sidebars prompting and guiding teachers to provide support in making more complex text accessible even to very young children.

Furthermore, the read-alouds are organized by domains so that children hear varying text selections on the same topic read aloud over at least a two week period, thereby maximizing the opportunities for implicit vocabulary learning. Each lesson also includes 5 minutes of explicit vocabulary instruction called Word Work, based on the research of Beck, McKeown and Kucan (2002).

4. Materials offer assessment opportunities that genuinely measure progress in the foundation of reading.

The K-2 Skills materials include beginning of the year placement tests, end of unit evaluations, mid-year assessments, and end of year assessments. These assessments evaluate specific code knowledge, as well as reading comprehension and fluency in the later grades. Each assessment tool is accompanied by detailed instructions for administering and analyzing student performance. Guidance is provided directing the teacher to specific remedial materials based on student performance on these assessments. Record keeping forms to facilitate identification of individual student strengths and weaknesses, as well as the formation of small groups for remedial instruction, are also included.

In addition, teachers are encouraged to use informal assessment of student performance based on direct observation of oral reading, student performance on worksheets, etc. A special icon,



is used to designate possible assessment opportunities. A handy conversion table is included in

all Teacher Guides to aid teachers in rapidly converting student performance on any number of items or questions into a percentage correct; classroom records are also included to facilitate record keeping.

Key Criteria for Text Selections

1. Texts for each grade align with the complexity requirements outlined in the standards.

As noted earlier, K-2 students are exposed to complex text with rich language through the fictional and informational read-alouds presented daily in the Listening and Learning Strand.

2. All students, including those who are behind, have extensive opportunities to encounter and comprehend grade level complex texts as required by the standards.

The K-2 CKLA Skills and Listening and Learning materials are intentionally presented as two independent strands of instruction. Students with weak decoding skills who may need below grade level instruction and remediation can still participate successfully in the grade level Listening and Learning instruction. Specific guidance is provided during professional development on how to effectively group students for Skills instruction at the level they need, while ensuring that they continue to experience the rich language of the grade level read-alouds during Listening and Learning.

3. Texts selections are worth reading and re-reading.

Listening and Learning Read-Alouds

Topics for the Listening and Learning read-alouds are drawn directly from the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. The validity of the topics included in the *Sequence* and their correlation with performance on various measures of literacy, such as state achievement tests and SAT scores, have been documented in numerous research studies over the past 30 years (see <http://www.coreknowledge.org/research>). One study of particular interest included an electronic search for Core Knowledge topics, as originally defined in *Cultural Literacy*, in articles from the *New York Times* over a period of 101 months. Results revealed that on any given day an average of 2,700 references were made in the *Times* to the Core Knowledge topics, suggesting that these topics and terms appear frequently in the published language of newspapers (Willinsky, J., 1988).

Skills

The selections for the Skills Readers are written using the CKLA Decoding Database to ensure practice of words using the specific letter sound correspondences that have been taught at any given point in the instructional sequence. Workbook pages activities are also written using the CKLA Decoding Database to ensure ample practice in applying the letter-sound correspondence knowledge students have been taught to words that that have not been previously studied.

K-2 CKLA materials also include nearly 4,000 images, many of which are 4-color images used to illustrate the listening and learning read-alouds and the skills readers. Over 70% of these images are original art commissioned by Core Knowledge for the CKLA materials.

4. Materials include a greater volume of informational text.

We have conducted an analysis of the CKLA materials to determine the percentages of fiction and informational text included in each grade level. The results are as follows:

Kindergarten	Fiction-68.6%	Informational Text-21.4%
Grade 1	Fiction-55.6%	Informational Text-44.4%
Grade 2	Fiction-59.2%	Informational Text-40.8%

(See CKLA Percentages of Fiction and Nonfiction Texts at the end of this section for further delineation of informational text into the areas of science or history).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, the topics for the Listening and Learning read-alouds are drawn directly from the *Core Knowledge Sequence*. The hallmark of the *Core Knowledge Sequence* is that topics are carefully sequenced over all grade levels, preschool-Grade 8, to ensure a spiraling, cumulative acquisition of knowledge about these topics in a systematic and coherent.

5. Additional materials markedly increase the opportunity for regular independent reading of texts that appeal to students' interests to develop both their knowledge and joy in reading.

Every K-2 Listening and Learning domain includes an extensive list of fiction and informational trade books that have been carefully reviewed by the Core Knowledge Foundation. In kindergarten, these books are intended to be read-aloud to students, given their very limited code knowledge at this age level. While the books listed for Grade 1 and Grade 2 also may also be read-aloud, especially for students struggling with decoding, by the middle of first grade, increasing numbers of students will be able to read these books themselves, either with an adult or independently.

Key Criteria for Questions and Tasks

1. Questions are grounded in the text and are worth thinking about and answering.

This principle has been foundational in the development of CKLA since its inception. Discussion questions during and after the read-alouds and the reader selections are included in the Teacher Guides for both Listening and Learning and Skills. At the kindergarten level, questions regarding the early simple stories in the Skills reader are primarily literal comprehension questions. However, higher order questions are included even in kindergarten in the Listening and Learning materials. In Grades 1 and 2, deliberate attention has been given to balancing both literal and inferential comprehension questions about the text. When answering a question, students are frequently asked to cite the specific text that substantiates their answer; workbook comprehension activities ask students to consistently cite the page that includes the text on which their answer is based.

2. Prereading activities start with the text itself.

This assumption likewise has been a foundational principle in the development of the K-2 CKLA materials since its inception. Prereading activities in both Skills and Listening and Learning typically focus on activating students' prior knowledge specific to the story and/or topic about to be heard or read. The fact that selections in both strands are based on topics from the *Core Knowledge Sequence* ensures that students do, in fact, possess prior knowledge based on what they have been taught in CKLA. The Teacher Guides at each grade level explicitly call the teacher's attention to the domains and topics that have been presented in earlier grade levels so that even though they may not be intimately familiar with the content of other grade levels, they can still reference information and material for students to recall based on what students read or listened to in earlier grade levels. Note especially the introductory lessons of the Reader, prior to students start reading the actual text; direction and materials using images and timelines are provided for the teacher to ensure that students have a historical context in which to reference what they will read in this Reader.

It should also be noted that, in Skills lessons, the instructional apparatus in the Teacher Guide for each story also calls the teacher's attention to words included in the text that may prove challenging due to either the inclusion of certain letter sound correspondences or the multi-syllable nature of the word.

3. Rather than focusing on general strategies and questions disconnected from texts, strategies and questions are cultivated in the context of reading specific texts.

Practice of reading strategies with randomly selected reading passages, i.e., for the sake of simply practicing the application of metacognitive strategies, such as text-to-self, text-to-text, etc., is not a component of the CKLA materials. The Core Knowledge Foundation expressly undertook the development of the CKLA materials to provide an alternative to this (unfortunately) predominant practice in other reading programs and approaches.

4. Reading selections are by design centrally located within materials.

The text of the Reader selections and the Listening and Learning read-alouds are the clear focus of all instructional activities and are easily located in all materials.

5. Materials offer assessment opportunities that genuinely measure progress.

As noted previously, in the subsection of these criteria that refers to Reading Foundations, the K-2 Skills Strand materials include beginning of the year placement tests, end of unit evaluations, mid-year assessments, and end of year assessments. These assessments evaluate specific code knowledge, as well as reading comprehension and fluency in the later grades.

In addition, assessments are also included at the end of each domain in Listening and Learning to assess student acquisition of the content knowledge presented during the domain. Care was taken in developing these assessments to ensure that they could be administered as group assessments, though there one or two instances in kindergarten that require that the teacher interact with each student individually.