

# THE COMMON CORE OF READING, WRITING, AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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Educators are in the information business...not just imparting information, but also teaching the *processes* of acquiring, interpreting, and conveying it. This movement of information is a process we know as *communication*. Communication is an integral part of our daily lives and involves the dynamic acts of gathering, exchanging and/or delivering information between individuals or groups. The active exchange of information typically involves two forms of interactions: an informal or intangible process that involves speech, visual cues, and listening, and a formal or permanent process that incorporates written language and the visual intake or output of the written word (reading and writing). Whether informal or formal, various modes of communication share a *common core* of cognitive skills that people must master in order to interact successfully in society.

Communication can be considered, on one level, as an “acquisition cycle” that orchestrates a symphony of knowledge based on one’s current and prior experiences and learning. Consider for a moment that, oral language (what one may speak or hear) can directly impact knowledge and curiosity; curiosity can then impact the desire to learn more through reading, and the knowledge we gain can then motivate us to transmit new knowledge into print and use it in our activities. The reality is that this cycle is universal, meaning that individuals can enter the “acquisition cycle” at any point and effectively move through the symphony of knowledge at their own pace. Skipping or not recognizing the relationships between these developmental areas can impair an individual’s ability to create the harmonious sounds of their knowledge symphony...leaving gaps in their learning similar to omitting a key section from a musical score.

The challenge for educators in today’s data-driven environment is to effectively identify and develop a curriculum that seamlessly integrates the common skill sets required for reading, writing, and language development. A major goal for curriculum is to meet the academic and social needs of all students and to prepare them to be successful in college and careers, which is the direct focus of the Common Core State Standards developed in 2009. To that end, let’s explore the relationship between reading, writing, and language development and what research over the last decade or so has shown about their interdependent nature.

Natural literacy development is largely dependent upon the experiences of the child that then become a source of their reading, writing, and language development activities. The relationship between these developmental areas is central to how people communicate and, consequently, how they understand and are understood throughout their lives. Traditionally, reading was taught separately from writing (often taught by the same teacher) and language development or *social English* has been an offshoot of maturation. What we now know is that the *interrelationship* between these developmental areas is a key building block to becoming a literate person. Helping students recognize *how* these building blocks are interrelated enables them to embrace the commonalities between reading, writing and language.

An important factor in realizing how individuals think and learn is to understand how the brain operates. In general, the brain processes information using either left or right brain functions. The left-brain is considered analytic in approach while the right brain is described as holistic or global. Typically, the brain tends to process information using the individual’s dominant side, partly explaining differences in how people learn information and construct meaning. However, the thinking and learning process is enhanced when both sides of the brain participate in a balanced manner. Preparing students to think and learn from a balanced perspective better enables them to maximize the total cognitive process. Therefore, integrating the appropriate cognitive skills into a layered instructional approach based on the intertwining of reading, writing, and language development establishes the context for the construction of meaning through relationships and creates a framework for the richest possible learning environment.

Given the interdependency of these processes (as shown in research), what are the common core cognitive skill sets, how can they be incorporated into teaching and what are the implications for teaching?

The core cognitive skills that are important for learning fall into six general categories:

1. Attention skills: The ability to attend to incoming information
2. Memory: The ability to store and recall information
3. Logic and reasoning: The ability to reason, form concepts, and solve problems using unfamiliar information or new procedures
4. Auditory processing: The ability to analyze, blend, and segment sounds
5. Visual Processing: The ability to perceive, analyze and think in visual images
6. Processing Speed: The ability to perform simple or complex cognitive tasks quickly

Research has shown that reading, writing, and language development involve similar cognitive processes; however, the different learning experiences and skills used for reading versus composing or writing do vary (Brook, 1988, Heller, 1991; Shanahan, 1998, Tiemey & Pearson, 1984; 1991). "In reading, meaning is *built from text*" (information is cognitively '*pulled in*') and in composing, meaning is *built for text*" (information is cognitively '*pushed out*') (Nelson, 1998, p. 279). Both learning events use all six cognitive skills; however, they may be used at different times, in different ways, and be influenced by the available repertoire of individual experiences.

The cognitive process is ultimately an individual one, closely linked to personal experiences and strategies that make accessing information a unique series of events. It is this unique process that contributes to individual learning styles. The goal for effective teaching should be to enable students to build on their personal knowledge base and experience success. Expanding students' ability to think and learn based on their understanding of the inter-relationships of the core skills inherent in reading, writing, and language development provides a strong cognitive framework to more easily interpret new information, merge it with learned information, and develop new insights or approaches to problem solving.

What does all of this mean for teaching?

Simply recognizing these concepts of learning is just the tip of the iceberg. In order to help students become confident readers, writers, and communicators, teachers must create learning environments that are based on "doing;" integrating core learning skills and strategies and keeping the student as the primary focus. Teaching reading, writing and language development as complementary concepts allows students to discover their natural interdependence. Positioning students to understand the power of this interdependence of reading, writing, and language development better prepares them to creatively move through the "acquisition cycle" and more easily convert experiential or learned information to new knowledge.

A classroom teacher, J. Brummitt-Yale, offers a list of five strategies for using reading and writing to reinforce development of literacy skills: 1) Immersion into different genre, 2) Reading to develop specific writing skills, 3) Integrating "sound" instruction in reading and writing, 4) Choice in reading and writing, and 5) *Talk about it!* (To read more about these strategies go to: (<http://www.k12reader.com/the-relationship-between-reading-and-writing/>.)

A major part of what we know comes from what we touch, hear, see, and text we read or write. Speaking, listening, reading and writing stimulate learning. Teaching them in a balanced instructional context based on appropriately integrated core cognitive skills and learning strategies provides students with the ability to recognize the interrelationships of learning across the curriculum. This fundamental knowledge, leveraged upon existing experiences and knowledge, gives students the confidence to question, clarify and think about concepts at a higher level.

Educators are in the information business, not just to impart information but also to develop literate students that are confident about their ability to learn and grow as individuals, and that are prepared to succeed in college or to enter the workforce in a competitive global economy.