



College and Career Readiness Standards-in-Action

FOCUSING ON ASSIGNMENTS AND STUDENT WORK

Facilitator Guide for English Language Arts/Literacy

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Produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-VAE-13-C-0066
with StandardsWork, Inc. and Subcontractor Reingold, Inc.

September 2015

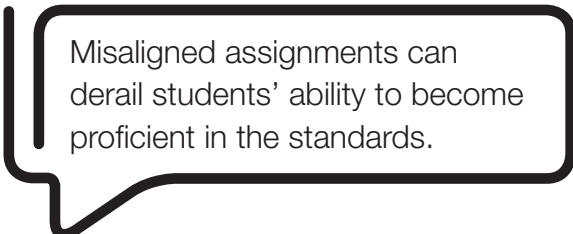
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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The ultimate goal of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards is to prepare adult students with the knowledge and skills they need for postsecondary success. The CCR Standards-in-Action (CCR SIA) Student Work Protocol is designed to evaluate the quality of assignments and their alignment with the CCR standards. Nothing more accurately confirms what happens in the classroom than instructor assignments and the student work produced in response. Together they verify what students are being taught and what they have learned, remembered, and incorporated into their knowledge base.

By reviewing instructor assignments and the resulting student work, it is possible to examine the topics being studied and to determine not only which CCR standards are being taught, *but also which are being learned*. Instructor assignments and the resulting student responses are, literally, standards-in-action. Research shows that poorly designed assignments are one of the leading causes of poor student outcomes.¹ Misaligned assignments can derail students' ability to become proficient in the standards. So student learning suffers if assignments, and the instruction leading to them, are not rigorous and targeted.



Misaligned assignments can derail students' ability to become proficient in the standards.

The CCR SIA Student Work Protocol is based on methods pioneered by The Education Trust and advanced by the EQUIP Student Work Protocol.² Focusing on assignments and student work enables all staff to share a common understanding of the challenging work demanded by the CCR standards. It prompts instructors to immerse students in rich learning contexts that promote active problem-solving, exploration, and discovery through assignments—a central component of instructors' work. Most important, this method helps programs close the gap between what students are learning and the expectations the standards embody. Common expectations will result in more equitable educational opportunities for students and create an additional foundation for collaboration among adult educators and programs in the state.

¹ The Education Trust. (n.d.). *Standards in Practice: An Instructional Gap Analysis*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved May 8, 2015, from <http://edtrust.org/resource/standards-in-practice-instructional-gap-analysis-strategy-aligning-instructions-with-standards-and-assessments/>

² Achieve, Inc., *EQUIP Student Work Protocol*, <http://www.achieve.org/EQUIP>.

The specific objectives of the CCR SIA Student Work Protocol are fourfold:

- 1 To confirm the alignment of the assignment with CCR standards.** This protocol will look at the relationship between the requirements of the assignment and the demands of the CCR standards. It will result in providing nuanced feedback on the quality of the assignment, with the ultimate goal of providing appropriately rigorous academic work for students.
- 2 To examine student responses to the assignment as evidence of how well the lesson supported student learning.** The protocol will review samples of student work to determine if they point to any possible weaknesses in the instructional materials.
- 3 To provide evidence-based suggestions for improving the assignment and related instructional materials.** Reviewers use insights from the assignment and student work to strengthen and revise both the assignment and the related instructional approaches. This will ensure that students are immersed in rich learning contexts and are engaging with the most important ideas, questions, and skills related to the standards.
- 4 To provide instructors with the opportunity to engage in structured, thoughtful conversations with colleagues about standards-based instruction.** Through shared professional learning and collaborative work and conversations, educators can develop common high expectations for students that are well-aligned with the demands of the CCR standards.

Instead of reviewing the standards and then developing aligned assignments and classroom activities, this method proceeds in the opposite order. It starts with an examination of actual student assignments. Focusing on assignments that instructors are currently giving to their students offers real benefits. Working with what instructors are doing already makes this review process relevant and concrete. It also allows instructors to take a fresh look at what they are assigning to see if changes are needed to strengthen alignment with the CCR standards.

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This method equips instructors with the skills they need to tailor instructional materials into rigorous, standards-based assignments based on what students produce as a result of these assignments. Instructors also are given the opportunity to learn by teaching in cooperative Critical Friends workgroups.³ As instructors improve standards-based assignments, they can archive and catalogue them for program use. That way, when new staff arrive, programs have a ready source of relevant, challenging assignments; instructors then can spend their time refining existing assignments, rather than inventing new ones in isolation.

³ The Critical Friends learning community model is a professional development approach based on dialogue and reflection developed in 1994 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. See a more complete description of the Critical Friends approach in the materials accompanying this facilitator guide.

OVERVIEW

In the method outlined below, assignments already in use are submitted for peer review and reflection. The goal is to strengthen their relevance, rigor, and alignment with CCR standards.

This method builds expertise by focusing on teaching in cooperative groups called Critical Friends workgroups. Instructors submit recent classroom assignments and student work samples to their peers for examination and solicit suggestions for modification. They follow this four-step method, which challenges them to inject more rigor and relevance into the assignments. The Critical Friends group:

- 1 Analyzes the purpose and demands of the assignment (without consulting the student work or standards):** What are students expected to learn from the assignment? What skills and knowledge must students exhibit to complete the assignment successfully?
- 2 Selects CCR standards that best fit the demands of the assignment:** How closely aligned is the assignment with one or more level-specific CCR content standards?
- 3 Analyzes student work:** What does the student work reveal about the skills and knowledge students have learned and still need to learn?
- 4 Redesigns and strengthens the assignment:** What does the student work suggest about how the assignment or the supporting instruction might be re-envisioned? How can the assignment be enhanced to add greater rigor and encourage higher student achievement?

MATERIALS YOU NEED

- Feedback Checklist for Team Members
(one copy for each participant for at least the first few sessions)
- CCR SIA Student Work Protocol for ELA/Literacy
(one copy for each participant for each session)
- CCR standards for ELA/literacy
(one copy for each participant for the duration of the team’s sessions)
- Redesigned Assignment for ELA/Literacy
(one copy for the facilitator or presenting instructor to complete each time an assignment is presented for review)
- Presenting instructor’s assignment
(one copy for each participant for each session)
- Corresponding student work
(one set for the team to share for each session)
- Overview of Critical Friends Model
(one copy for each participant for the duration of the sessions)



TIME FRAME

At the beginning of the process, instructors should meet for about one hour every couple of weeks to review student work. Allow extra time at the first session to introduce the process, set ground rules, and analyze the first assignment. Sessions should be held regularly and scheduled in advance. If you are able at the first meeting, determine the schedule of sessions for the year. The more regularly you hold meetings, the more automatic and efficient the process will be. After every instructor on the review team has presented an assignment and its associated student work, this process can be repeated indefinitely with other assignments to continue to hone instructors’ skills.

In the beginning, the process works best and is most beneficial when facilitated. Instructors who are new to the process should not be expected to facilitate their own meetings.

PREPARATIONS

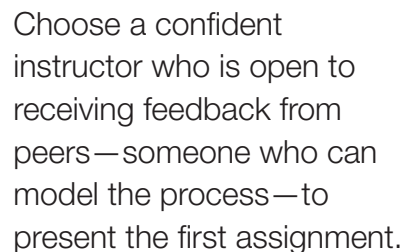
Divide instructors into small groups (four to six members each) to examine assignments and the corresponding student work. Keeping the groups small will allow instructors to feel more comfortable speaking. Content area teams can be organized either vertically, with members representing different adult education learning levels, or horizontally, with all team members who teach at the same learning level. Programs should select the organizational structure that best suits their needs.

For the initial session, introduce the process and set ground rules for team meetings without attempting to analyze a specific instructor’s assignment.

Separating the introduction from the first work session will give members time to internalize the process. It also will allow you to use a common assignment, one that does not come from any instructor in the group. That way, instructors can concentrate on learning the process without being in the spotlight. If you decide to hold a separate introductory session—and if you are facilitating several groups—you can combine the groups for one larger introductory session. Combining multiple groups is efficient and can promote a richer discussion of the process, as well as expand the reach of that discussion across teams and programs.

Subsequent meetings of each small group should focus on a different instructor’s selected assignment. Each team member should have the opportunity to submit at least one of his or her assignments for review.

Be prepared to facilitate at least the first several meetings. In the beginning, the process works best and is most beneficial when facilitated. Instructors who are new to the process should not be expected to facilitate their own meetings. This way you can remind reviewers to keep comments on topic and give supportive feedback. And you can watch the time to keep the process moving.



Choose a confident instructor who is open to receiving feedback from peers—someone who can model the process—to present the first assignment.

At least a week before each team meets, ask the presenting instructor to select a classroom assignment and collect the corresponding student work. Choose a confident instructor who is open to receiving feedback from peers—someone who can model the process—to present the first assignment.

The following is advice regarding the selection and preparation of this work:

CHARACTERISTICS OF ASSIGNMENTS	CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT WORK
Select a typical assignment that is aligned with the CCR standards.	Collect a representative sample of student work that captures a range of abilities in the classroom.
Select an assignment that students completed <i>recently</i> so student work is current.	Make the collection a manageable size—three to six samples—matching or slightly exceeding the number of people on the review team.
If teaching a particular concept has included several assignments, present the culminating assignment based on the fullest expression of that concept.	If necessary per your program’s policies, remove student names from the work samples to maintain student confidentiality and facilitate discussion. ⁴
Choose an assignment that could use some attention and improvement (rather than one of the instructor’s best assignments).	Copy the student work <i>before</i> grading the papers so that each sample has only the student responses to the assignment.
Include directions and scoring guidelines for student assignments just as they were presented to students, with no other details or context included. Include copies of any text(s) that are part of the assignment.	Number the individual pieces of student work so that reviewers can organize their discussions more easily.
If the assignment was presented to students orally, write down the instructions as they were given and note that they were spoken.	If work is oral, present student recordings.
Do <i>not</i> include lesson plans, teaching or learning goals for the assignment, what students did or learned, and other related information.	

To streamline and speed up the process, you could distribute the assignment before the team meets, instructing team members to analyze its purpose and demands in advance.

⁴ Removing students’ name from assignment samples can safeguard confidentiality as well as help instructors to focus on the work without being distracted by what they know or have heard about a particular student.

IMPLEMENTATION DIRECTIONS

PART 1—CONDUCT THE FOUR-STEP CCR SIA STUDENT WORK PROTOCOL

Introduce the purpose of the CCR SIA Student Work Protocol to instructors.

Engage in a frank discussion with each team about the challenges and rewards of giving and receiving feedback on assignments. Set the expectation that even the strongest assignments can be improved. Remind the team that the purpose of this process is to strengthen the assignments, not to judge or evaluate the presenting instructor.

As part of the introduction, include a rationale for starting with actual assignments and moving from there to the standards. Underscore the need for the assignment to stand alone, without lesson plans or additional supporting information. It is important to be able to determine from the assignment itself (and the resulting student work) what content is being studied and which standards are being taught and learned.

Outline the four-step process.



Review the feedback checklist with your team members. Spend some time reviewing and reflecting on what constitutes effective, respectful feedback for fruitful discussions. Start by reviewing the feedback checklist. Make sure the team thinks that the checklist adequately reflects their desired group norms, refining it as necessary.

Develop the ground rules. Discuss what it means to be a Critical Friend. Review the overview of the Critical Friends groups document; then, as a group, generate a list of ground rules based on your discussions for the sessions.

Determine the full schedule of sessions, if possible. Doing this allows staff to plan. The more regularly you hold meetings, the more automatic and efficient the process will be.

Complete the feedback checklist. For at least the first few meetings, ask each team member—including the presenting instructor—to fill out the feedback checklist before and after the sessions. This will firmly establish the ground rules with team members and serve as a reminder to self-assess the quality of their feedback. As the team gains experience, you may want to use the checklist only intermittently, as a refresher.

Complete the Four-Step Student Work Protocol Process.

Step 1 : Analyze the purpose and demands of the assignment.

The first step is for reviewers to develop a focused understanding of the assignment. Without consulting the standards or student work, reviewers analyze what the assignment is asking of students—what they must know and be able to do. Reviewers should do this independently, and then share their thoughts with the group. (The presenting instructor should only listen during Step 1 and should not lead the group discussion.)

Provide time for all reviewers to read through every part of the assignment, including any scoring guidelines. Remind reviewers to look at the assignment through the students' eyes—just as they first saw it:

- Begin the discussion with the instructors who are serving as reviewers in the group.
- Prompt team members to take the assignment at face value. Ask them to limit their observations to what the assignment communicates about its purpose; they should not assign to it purposes that are not readily evident. Throughout the process, all discussions and observations should be based on evidence found in the assignment.
- Study the assignment thoroughly, making notes about its demands. Read any passages accompanying the assignment.
- Use only the directions and prompts provided to analyze the assignment's requirements. Do not consult the instructional context and supporting materials in the lesson. This way, reviewers will have an unfiltered view of students' experience with the assignment so its effectiveness can be evaluated accurately.
- If students were given scoring guidelines or rubrics as part of the assignment, then review them as well.

- Encourage instructors to resist the temptation to imbue the assignment with knowledge and skills that are not readily apparent, even if everyone agrees that they were probably intended. If there are skills and knowledge that naturally could be part of the assignment, capture the good ideas about how to make those explicit in the assignment’s redesign.
- Make notes in the space provided on the protocol about the content and performance demands of the assignment.

Step 2 : Select the CCR standards that best match the assignment’s demands.

Working together, reviewers select the CCR standards that most closely embody the content and student performance contained within the assignment. They also identify whether the assignment addresses one or more of the key instructional advances. Then they determine the level of alignment with the CCR standards and note any gaps.

- Identify the CCR standard(s) addressed by the assignment. Before the presenting instructor contributes to this discussion, he or she should allow reviewers first to share their unbiased thoughts on the assignment’s alignment with CCR standards.
- Identify the key instructional advances that are addressed by the assignment: Text Complexity, Evidence, and Knowledge. Remember, more than one advance likely is present.
- Identify no more than four CCR standards that match the content and performance requirements of the assignment, and note whether they are at the appropriate level of learning.
- If the assignment appears to be a better fit for a standard that is “below level,” note the gap between that standard and a corresponding standard at the appropriate level of instruction.
- Avoid forcing an assignment to fit certain CCR standards. If the assignment clearly doesn’t fit any CCR standard at the appropriate level, go to Step 4.

- Determine the quality of alignment, using a chart like the one provided below as a guide. Rate the alignment of the assignment’s content and performance for every standard identified as a target for the assignment.
- For any 1 or 2 rating, describe the gaps between the knowledge and skills demanded by the standards and those of the assignment.

Alignment Descriptors: Use these descriptors when considering the quality of alignment between the assignment and the identified standards of best fit.

ALIGNMENT OF THE ASSIGNMENT WITH THE IDENTIFIED CCR STANDARDS		
3	EXCELLENT	The demands of the assignment are clearly consistent with all aspects of the content of the identified standard(s).
2	STRONG	The demands of the assignment are consistent with the <i>most critical</i> aspects of the identified standard(s). However, some of the <i>less critical</i> aspects of the standard(s) may not be addressed.
1	WEAK	The assignment demands do <i>not</i> address the <i>most critical</i> aspects of the identified standard(s). However, some of the <i>less critical</i> aspects of the standard(s) are addressed.
0	NO ALIGNMENT	No CCR standards match the demands of the assignment.

Note: The presenting instructor should participate fully in the process for Steps 3 and 4. He or she can respond to and ask questions, but should be careful not to monopolize the discussion.

Step  : Analyze student work.

Diagnose how well students performed on the assignment and whether and how they struggled with it. This information will contribute to the final step of determining how to strengthen the lesson, or to the development of strategies to provide supports for any identified student weaknesses.

- First, ask instructors to work *individually* to diagnose each sample of student work to determine: (1) how well students seemed to understand the assignment; (2) how well each student’s work demonstrated his or her proficiency with the targeted standards; and (3) the depth of each student’s understanding of the content.
- Then ask the team to work *collectively* to compare and reconcile their individual reflections and identify patterns across the student work samples. Note what students seem to know and not know, and how they struggled—if they did.

Step 4 : Redesign and strengthen the assignment.

The final step is to determine what should be kept, deleted, and/or added to the content and performance demands of the assignment for tighter alignment with the targeted CCR standards.

- As a group, review notes and observations from Steps 1–3 and decide what to keep, delete, or add to the assignment so that it more closely aligns with CCR standard(s). Make sure changes add challenge to the assignment and encourage higher student achievement.
- Ask one member of the group to fill out the Redesigned Assignment with decisions made in “a.”
- Provide time for the presenting instructor to outline the instructional practices to be used in the next lesson the presenter creates, teaches, and brings to the Critical Friends group.
- Ask team members to look beyond the specific assignments to draw general conclusions about what they have learned through the discussion and to consider ideas for additional professional development.

PART 2—ASSESS THE GROUP PROCESS AND CATALOGUE THE IMPROVED ASSIGNMENT

Ask the team to review the feedback process at the end of the session. Ask team members, including the presenting instructor, to fill out the feedback checklist. Give the presenting instructor the opportunity to express to the group his or her feelings and thoughts about the experience, and to share insights on instructional practices that might be used in future assignments by members of the Critical Friends group.

Add the improved assignment to the resource file. Ask the presenting instructor to fill out the Redesigned Assignment form. Then add that assignment, with a list of specific CCR standards that are aligned to it, to a resource file for instructors in your program to use. This may be an electronic file so that teachers can easily download, share, and update the improved version of the assignment.

If possible (and advisable for students in the class), implement the redesigned assignment. Ask the presenting instructor, or another instructor on the team, to try the improved assignment and report its implementation to the team—what went well, and what could be even better. At the team’s next meeting, ask the instructor who taught the assignment to:

- Summarize how the assignment was strengthened to align more fully with the selected standards. (Note ways to make it even stronger.)
- Explain briefly any teaching strategies used to better prepare students for the assignment.
- Share examples of new student work and describe what they indicate about improved student learning and achievement.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

After completing Focusing on Assignments and Student Work, ask your instructors to reflect on the activities' effectiveness and on what they learned. Here are some discussion questions to consider:

- What worked well and what could be improved?
- How has participating in these activities changed your thinking about CCR standards?
- How will you use these new methods and materials to improve your teaching practice and student learning?
- What additional professional development resources and materials might you need?