

Vermont • English Language Arts

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Grade Expectations for Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities: Reading and Writing. Spring 2004.
Accessed from: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pubs/grade_expectations/math_reading_writing.pdf

Overview

The content that *is* included in the Vermont standards is generally covered adequately. Unfortunately, large chunks of essential ELA content go unaddressed, much repetition exists across grade levels, and the high school standards only include one level, making it impossible to know how student work should progress from year to year in grades 9-12. The standards could also be much more clear and specific.



Clarity and Specificity: 1/3
Content and Rigor: 2/7
Total State Score: 3/10
(Common Core Grade: B+)

General Organization

Vermont identifies standards only for reading and writing. For reading, they are divided into six categories:

- » Reading Strategies
- » Reading Accuracy
- » Reading Comprehension and Responding to Text (Informational)
- » Reading Comprehension and Responding to Text (Literary)
- » Reading Range of Text
- » Reading Range of Text and Literate Community

Writing standards are divided into ten categories:

- » Writing Dimensions
- » Writing Conventions
- » Structures
- » Response to Literature, Literary Elements, and Devices and Responding to Text
- » Reports and Research
- » Narratives and Literary Elements and Devices
- » Procedures
- » Persuasive Writing
- » Personal Essay
- » Poetry and Literary Elements and Devices

For grades K-8, each category is divided into grade-level expectations. High school standards are not broken down by grade, however, making it all but impossible to make distinctions between the content and skills expected of ninth-graders versus twelfth-graders.

No standards are provided for listening and speaking, media, or research.

Clarity and Specificity

Some of Vermont’s standards are clear and specific. Generally, however, they suffer from repetition and a confounding organization that makes it extremely difficult to track expectations across grade levels. Some repetition is tolerable in state standards if clear attempts have been made to differentiate expectations at “milestone” grades—and the Vermont standards sometimes do this. More often, however, they are repeated verbatim across many levels, such as this “writing process” standard that is found in *every* grade:

Students use prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and critiquing to produce final drafts of written products (grades 1-12)

Some impossible-to-measure standards are also included, such as the “Literate Community” standards, which expect students to:

Demonstrate participation in a literate community by...

- Participating in in-depth discussions about text, ideas, and student writing by offering comments and supporting evidence, recommending books and other materials, and responding to the comments and recommendations of peers, librarians, teachers, and others (grades 4-12)

These standards are not only unmeasurable, but also repeat from grade 4-12.

In high school, because no grade-by-grade or even grade-span standards are included, it is very difficult to make sense of comprehensive standards like this one:

Identify[ing] the characteristics of a variety of types of text (e.g., literary texts: poetry, plays, fairy tales, fantasy, fables, realistic fiction, folktales, historical fiction, mysteries, science fiction, legends, myths, short stories, epics [poems, novels, dramas], adventure myths, comedies, tragedies, satires, parodies) (high school)

Without more grade-level specificity, teachers will not know which types of texts should be addressed at which grades. The standards would greatly benefit from another round of edits and better organization to ensure appropriate clarity and progression across grades. Thus, The Green Mountain State receives one point out of three for Clarity and Specificity. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Strengths

Vermont’s standards for early reading are systematic and thorough, as in this “Reading Strategies” standard:

[Student] [a]pplies word identification/decoding skills and strategies (leading to automaticity) by ...

- Reading grade-appropriate, high-frequency words (including irregularly spelled words, contractions, etc.)
- Identifying sound-symbol correspondences: consonants, two-letter blends (e.g., bl, gr), basic consonant and vowel digraphs (e.g., th, ee, ay), short vowels and long vowels affected by silent e (grade 1)

“Context and self-correction strategies” are also delineated, but they do not eclipse the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics in the early grades. Vocabulary is addressed in “reading strategies” and includes “knowledge of word structure” to “unlock meaning.” Context clues are mentioned, but not overly emphasized at the expense of word analysis, and, later, etymology.

As we move through the grades, “comprehension strategies” and “monitoring and adjusting strategies” become more frequent, but Vermont is a bit more explicit than other states about what these entail. For example, strategies for understanding literary and informational text include “making connections,” but also “using text structure clues (e.g., chronological, cause/effect, compare/contrast, proposition and support, logical/sequential).”

The treatment of literary text is fairly thorough. Some repetition exists across grades, but an attempt has been made to scaffold the content, as illustrated by these standards for analysis and interpretation of literary text—one for fifth grade, the other for sixth:

Analyze and interpret elements of literary texts, citing evidence where appropriate by...

- Identifying the narrator (grade 5)
- Explaining how the narrator’s point of view affects the reader’s interpretation (grade 6)

Literary genres, elements, and stylistic devices are all addressed, though again with some repetition.

Vermont’s “Reading Widely and In Depth” standards are more measurable than most “habits of reading” standards which generally enjoin students to “enjoy reading.” These standards note the numbers of books and the range of genres that students should read each year. Vermont also offers descriptions of the quality and complexity of reading that students should encounter at certain grade spans, and offers a handful of sample titles.

Standards for writing in response to literary text are fairly well articulated and include most of the elements of a good argument, as in this standard:

In response to literary or informational text, students make and support analytical judgments about text by...

- Stating and maintaining a focus (purpose), a firm judgment, or a point of view when responding to a given question
- Using specific details and references to text or relevant citations to support focus or judgment
- Making inferences about the relationship(s) among content, events, characters, setting, theme, or author’s craft

Examples: Style, bias, literary techniques, point of view, or characteristics of literary forms and genres (grade 6)

This writing standard helps to round out general expectations concerning the analysis of literary texts. The writing strand also delineates clear spelling expectations for each grade.

Content Weaknesses

Although the standards include definitions of text complexity and some examples are given, additional suggestions would give a much better sense of the rigor of reading expectations. In high school, for example, the only novel listed is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, along with the nonfiction title *Into Thin Air*, and, finally, *Newsweek* magazine. These few titles hardly suggest the full range of high school reading.

The treatment of informational text is not as thorough as literary text. It appears to focus more on “practical/functional” texts than on the analysis of arguments and other forms of persuasive writing. Consider this standard, for example:

Demonstrate initial understanding of informational texts (expository and practical texts) by...

- Identifying the characteristics of a variety of types of text (e.g., **reference**: reports, magazines, textbooks, newspapers, public documents and discourse, technical manuals, Internet Web sites, biographies, autobiographies, essays, articles, thesauruses; and **practical/functional texts**: procedures, instructions, recipes, menus, announcements, invitations, advertisements, pamphlets) (grade 7) (emphasis added)

Such all-encompassing standards imply that cake recipes and biographies carry equal weight and/or demand the same types of reading skills, which of course they do not. Standards are far more illuminating and actionable when priorities are described at various grade levels, characteristics of each genre are elaborated, and, especially in the high school grades, standards for analysis of arguments and persuasive writing are specifically scaffolded.

The quality of Vermont’s writing standards is spotty. The standards for writing literary analyses are adequate, as noted above, as are those for persuasive writing, but they fall short when it comes to other kinds of informational writing. Standards for writing “reports” are outlined in the early grades, but serious research products are never included, even in high school. Moreover, undue emphasis (an entire strand across all grades) is placed on “procedural writing.” Whole strands are also devoted to “narrative writing,” “expressive writing,” “reflective essays,” and even to “poetry.” It is difficult to determine writing priorities at each grade level or span when no samples of acceptable student writing are included.

English language conventions, covered under the writing heading, address mechanics and punctuation only until fifth grade. Grammar is then addressed, but only in the most cursory way, as in this fifth-grade standard:

In independent writing, students demonstrate command of appropriate English conventions by...

- Identifying or correcting grammatical errors (grade 5)

Some examples are included, but most are repeated across grades and ultimately not enough are given to comprise a systematic treatment of crucial grammar content.

Vermont fails to include any standards for listening and speaking, research, or media. These significant gaps, coupled with the inappropriate emphasis the state places on unnecessary or less-important content (see *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A), earn the Green Mountain state two points out of seven for Content and Rigor.

The Bottom Line

With their grade of D, Vermont's ELA standards are among the worst in the country, while those developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative earn a solid B-plus. The CCSS ELA standards are significantly superior to what the Green Mountain State has in place today.

¹ The Vermont reading standards have not changed since our last evaluation, the *State of State Standards 2005*. The writing standards for grades 3-8, however, have changed. In addition, the evaluation criteria that we used to judge the 2010 standards have been substantially revised and improved since 2005. (See Appendix C for a complete explanation of changes in criteria.) These changes contributed to a change in Vermont's final ELA grade: from a C to a D. The complete 2005 review can be found here: http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=337&pubsubid=1072#1072.

Vermont • Mathematics

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED¹

Vermont's Frameworks of Standards and Learning Opportunities. Fall 2000.

Accessed from: <http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pubs/framework.pdf>

Grade Expectations for Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities. Spring 2004.

Accessed from: http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pubs/grade_expectations/math_reading_writing.pdf

Overview

Vermont's standards are minimal in number, and the organization makes them difficult to read. Arithmetic is neither prioritized nor well developed in the elementary grades; much of high school mathematics is not covered.



Clarity and Specificity: 1/3

Content and Rigor: 1/7

Total State Score: 2/10

(Common Core Grade: A-)

General Organization

The K-8 standards are introduced with a short section called “mathematical understanding,” which lists broad mathematical goals by the following grade spans: Pre-K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. The standards are then organized by content strands such as Function and Algebra Concepts. There are also process standards (including such topics as problem-solving and mathematical reasoning) that are meant to be integrated into the instruction of all content.

The content strands are broken into topics. Standards within a particular topic all begin with the same stem phrase. Finally, the topics are broken into grade-level expectations. (It is the grade-level expectations that are referred to as “standards” throughout this review.) Some topics with their associated stem phrase are appropriately not completed in each grade.

High school standards are included in the document but are not separated by grade level.

Clarity and Specificity

The standards are not clear or easy to read. The stem organization of the grade-level material is poorly implemented and has resulted in many standards that are both awkward and unclear. This is illustrated in the following standard, where the stem phrase is in bold:

Demonstrates conceptual understanding of rational numbers with respect to whole numbers from 0 to 100 using place value (a grouping system wherein a digit's place in a number denotes its value; e.g., in 34, 3 represents 3 tens, or 30); by applying the concepts of equivalency in composing or decomposing numbers (e.g., $12 = 7 + 5$); and in expanded notation (e.g., $41 = 4 \text{ tens} + 1 \text{ one}$ or $41 = 40 + 1$) using models, explanations, or other representations. Shows correct sequence of ordinal and cardinal numbers and compares cardinal numbers [and]

[P]ositive fractional numbers (benchmark fractions: $a/2$, $a/3$, or $a/4$ where a is a whole number greater than 0 and less than or equal to the denominator) as part/whole relationships of benchmark fractions with models, diagrams, or written or verbal/scribed response (grade 1) (emphasis original)

The stem phrase unnecessarily inserts rational numbers into a first-grade standard, and the concluding statements are overly complicated and unclear. Much of arithmetic is presented in this same format with the same bolded stem phrases, and all are difficult to read and understand. For example, every grade from one to eight has a standard beginning with:

Demonstrates a conceptual understanding of linear relationships ($y = kx$) as a constant rate of change by... (grades 1-8)
(emphasis original)

The Mathematical Understanding section of the framework is sometimes clearer than the grade-level material since the statements are not hampered by the use of stem phrases—but because they are presented only for grade bands, they are not much use as grade-level standards.

The standards are difficult to read and many of them are not clear or measurable. They are not a “clear guide for users,” resulting in a Clarity and Specificity score of one point out of three. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

Content and Rigor

Content Priorities

Vermont has few standards per grade. This could have served to prioritize arithmetic in elementary school. However, standards on arithmetic comprise less than one-third of the standards so that arithmetic is not properly prioritized.

Content Strengths

The standards cover some of the basic properties of arithmetic well, including commutativity, associativity, and distributivity. They also explicitly cover the inverse relationship of addition and subtraction and of multiplication and division.

Content Weaknesses

The list of problems with content that is either missing or covered with inadequate detail is extensive.

The development of arithmetic is weak, in part because instant recall of the basic number facts is not explicitly required.

Fluency and the standard algorithms are not included in the standards. Students are expected to solve arithmetic problems, but the methods to be used are not specified and fluency is not mentioned, as is illustrated by:

Accurately solve problems involving multiple operations on whole numbers or the use of the properties of factors and multiples; and addition or subtraction of decimals and positive proper fractions with like denominators. (Multiplication limited to 2 digits by 2 digits, and division limited to 1 digit divisors) (grade 4) (emphasis original)

This standard does not support mastery of multiplication. The development of fraction arithmetic is similar. Students are required to “accurately solve problems” with fractions but fluency and procedures are not specified. In addition, there is no mention of common denominators.

In high school, which is essentially treated as a single grade, there are only twenty-one standards for the grade-level expectations. Most of the essential content for high school is missing. There is some basic material on linear functions, but quadratics are not mentioned. Also missing in high school are polynomials, factoring, proof in geometry, and most STEM-ready topics.

The *Framework* document offers an additional thirty-one high school standards in the section on Mathematical Understanding. These include some of the content that is missing from the grade-level expectations, such as complex numbers and proofs in geometry. However, the coverage is neither rigorous nor detailed. For example, while the *Framework* mentions quadratic equations, it is only in the broad and general statement:

Define and use variables, parameters, constants, and unknowns in work with both functions and equations; solve equations both symbolically and graphically, especially linear, quadratic, and exponential equations (high school)

Vermont’s standards are missing most of high school mathematics. In addition, arithmetic is neither prioritized nor well developed. These numerous problems result in a score of one point out of seven for Content and Rigor. (See *Common Grading Metric*, Appendix A.)

The Bottom Line

With their grade of F, Vermont's mathematics standards are among the worst in the country, while those developed by the Common Core State Standards Initiative earn an impressive A-minus. The CCSS math standards are vastly superior to what the Green Mountain State has in place today.

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- ¹ Vermont's academic content standards have not changed since Fordham's last evaluation, the *State of State Mathematics Standards 2005*. However, the evaluation criteria that we used to judge the 2010 standards have been substantially revised and improved since 2005. (See Appendix C for a complete explanation of changes in criteria.) Through this new lens, Vermont's math grade dropped from a D in 2005 to an F in 2010. The complete 2005 review can be found here: http://www.edexcellence.net/detail/news.cfm?news_id=338&pubsubid=1187#1187.