INTRODUCTION

FINDING THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB: IMPROVING READING AND WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

By Victoria McDougald

Many years after the adoption of new academic standards in most states, frustrated teachers and administrators across the country still decry the dearth of Common Core-aligned curricular materials. One survey conducted by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) in 2014 found that 90 percent of surveyed districts reported having major or minor problems finding such resources.\(^1\) More recent studies conducted by Morgan Polikoff and Bill Schmidt also conclude that the majority of textbooks marketed as being aligned with Common Core actually have “substantial alignment problems.”\(^2\)

In response to this persistent lack of high-quality, standards-aligned materials, organizations such as EdReports and agencies like the Louisiana Department of Education have begun providing educators with free, independent reviews of curricular resources.\(^3\) Other groups have developed rubrics and evaluation tools intended to help state, district, and school leaders vet the quality and alignment of textbooks, units, and lesson plans (including EQuIP, IMET, and Student Achievement Partners’ “Publishers’ Criteria”).\(^4\) Even Amazon has entered the curricular stage, recently announcing the launch of a new platform for educators that will feature free curricular resources and teacher ratings and reviews.\(^5\)

To date, however, very little information exists on the quality and content of digital learning tools intended to supplement a full curriculum. And what does exist isn’t as user-friendly as it could be for teachers and students. One site, EdSurge, aims to provide educators with information on digital curricula and tools for teaching and learning.\(^6\) The site includes hundreds of overviews of various resources (including basic pricing and usage information), which are accompanied by individual educator ratings and feedback on each tool. While the voluminous site includes resources for a wide range of subjects—from language arts to social studies and even engineering—the program and product overviews themselves are fairly brief, and it’s difficult to sort through the (sometimes hundreds of!) educator reflections on each tool. LearningList is a similar site that provides brief reviews of publishers’ instructional materials (both comprehensive and supplemental), including standards alignment.\(^7\)

We thought we might be able to do a little better, at least in terms of providing in-depth reviews of several promising digital tools. To this end, we recruited a team of all-star educators to evaluate the quality and usefulness of nine K–12 English language arts (ELA)/literacy instructional tools: Achieve the Core’s “Text Sets,” Curriculet, iCivics Drafting Board, Lexia Reading Core5, Newsela, Quill, ReadWorks, ThinkCERCA, and WriteLike.\(^8\) We focused on ELA
resources as educators stress that those are especially difficult to come by, particularly when it comes to writing tools.

When choosing the tools, we intentionally included a range of reading, writing, and content-building resources recommended to us by practitioners and other curriculum experts. Most are free or low-cost, and while some resources (such as Newsela) are already in high demand, we also aimed to highlight newer and lesser-known resources for the field. Finally, we intentionally included several interactive, student-facing tools, as these remain relatively rare in the ELA curricular landscape (which tends to comprise tools designed mostly for use by teachers rather than by students). Collectively, the digital tools we reviewed focus on reading and/or writing instruction across all grade levels (K-12).

For each resource, reviewers assessed the following:

What is the tool or product designed to do?

- Is it intended to be aligned to college- and career-ready standards (including Common Core)?
- Does it include student assessments or data reporting for teachers?
- How is it intended to be used, and how might the resource be better used by educators?
- Is it organized logically and easy for teachers (and/or students) to use?
- Does the tool include beneficial suggestions for how it might be integrated into a larger curriculum?
- What are the tool’s overall strengths and weaknesses?

For reading, we also evaluated whether the tools include high-quality texts that are grade-appropriate and sequenced to build content knowledge and vocabulary, and whether they include a balance of text types and text-dependent questions and tasks (as called for by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)).

For writing, we assessed whether the tools include instruction on specific writing skills and a balance of writing text types, as called for by CCSS.

The reviews were conducted by four top-notch, experienced educators in the summer and fall of 2016:

- Melody Arabo is a third-grade teacher in Michigan, a National Education Association (NEA) Master Teacher, a Michigan Educator Voice Fellow, the 2015 Michigan Teacher of the Year, and a 2016 Teaching Ambassador Fellow for the U.S. Department of Education.
- Jonathan Budd is a K–12 director of curriculum, instruction, and assessments in Connecticut with nineteen years of prior teaching experience. His particular expertise is literacy, with a focus on text complexity.
• Shannon Garrison is a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in California with two decades of teaching experience. She holds a National Board Certification and serves on the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

• Tabitha Pacheco is a ten-year teaching veteran who holds a National Board Certification. She is a 2015 National Teaching Fellow for the Hope Street Group and serves on the Practitioners Advisory Group for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.

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Six years into Common Core implementation, procuring CCSS-aligned instructional materials continues to be a time-consuming challenge for many educators. This report provides ELA teachers with information on nine particularly promising low- or no-cost reading and writing tools that are currently accessible online, and highlights important strengths and weaknesses for each.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was made possible through the generous support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

First and foremost, we are deeply grateful to authors Melody Arabo, Jonathan Budd, Shannon Garrison, and Tabitha Pacheco for their thoughtful review of these digital learning tools.

On Fordham’s side, we extend gratitude to Amber Northern and Chester E. Finn, Jr. for reviewing drafts, Yasmine Rana and Clara Allen for handling funder relations, and Alyssa Schwenk for overseeing the report’s dissemination. We also thank Andrew Scanlan and Darien Wynn for the helpful research and administrative assistance they provided in the early stages of the project.

Thanks also to Pamela Tatz, for copyediting the report, Irene Mone, who designed the report’s layout, and user kitzcorner of Getty Images for the image used on the report’s cover.
READING TOOLS
(TEXT SETS)
READWORKS

PART ONE: REPUTABLE READS FOR FREE

By Shannon Garrison

We know the importance of students developing strong reading comprehension skills. Students need to be able to read and understand a variety of complex texts in order to be successful – in school, in their careers, and in life.

As a teacher, I am always looking for new and better ways to engage my students in reading. One recent find worth sharing is ReadWorks. This site provides teachers with passages, paired texts, text sets, lessons, comprehension units, and novel study units, all at no charge to the user. The materials are research-based, come from reputable sources, and are classroom ready.

ReadWorks Overview

ReadWorks is an education website that provides teachers with online, research-based units, lessons, and nonfiction and literary passages to help develop and strengthen student reading comprehension. As its website says, “ReadWorks is committed to solving the nation’s reading comprehension crisis by giving teachers the research-proven tools and support they need to improve the academic achievement of their students.”

The ReadWorks website offers more than 2,600 informational and literary passages for students in grades K-12 at no cost. About half of its passages were commissioned from professional journalists and writers, while others were obtained from partner institutions such as the National Audubon Society, History.com, and the American Museum of Natural History.

The passages are supported by an extensive research base, including studies by the National Reading Panel and the RAND Reading Study Group. The website also summarizes key research on topics such as comprehension skills, read-alouds, vocabulary instruction, developing background information, and instruction in text structure and syntax.

All passages on the website are searchable by keyword, grade, lexile level (a standard for matching readers with appropriate texts), topic, text type, and skill/strategy. The text passages are grouped under 12 topics, such as Civics & Government, Technology & Engineering, and World History, so teachers can easily find passages to fit whatever subject or topic they are teaching. Literary, informational, and poetry passages are all available. In addition, the skills/strategies are broken into 20 distinct categories, including Author’s Purpose, Cause/Effect, Drawing Conclusions, and Vocabulary in Context. This helps teachers find passages suited to the teaching of specific reading skills or to select passages that address multiple skills and strategies.
The majority of ReadWorks’ reading passages are accompanied by a text-dependent question set, i.e. questions that require students to use evidence from the text to answer correctly. They aid in assessing student comprehension and typically contain five to ten multiple-choice and short answer items.

Additional resources accompanying some passages include a vocabulary resource with definitions, cognates (words with common etymology), and sample uses of the words. Also available are “StepReads,” which are more accessible versions of the passage for struggling readers, as well as text pairs. (As of October 2016, ReadWorks has developed at least one StepReads passage for approximately 280 of its texts. About 40 texts have two StepReads passages, and this will continue to rise in the coming months.) Teachers can filter search results to locate passages that contain any of these specific resources. For example, a teacher can search for 8th grade life-science passages that contain both vocabulary and StepReads options.

ReadWorks does not specify the order in which teachers should present passages, but it does provide general recommendations, such as suggesting that early-grade teachers start with literary texts and focus first on passages that lend themselves to teaching character, setting, and plot. It also recommends—for both literary and informational texts—that educators begin by focusing on drawing conclusions, inferences, and how to understand vocabulary-in-context.

Resources on the site are said to be aligned to all state standards (including the Common Core), and to several widely used reading programs, including Macmillan McGraw-Hill Treasures and Houghton Mifflin-Harcourt Journeys. Teachers can use the “My Standards Alignment” tab to select their state or their reading program to show which ReadWorks lessons align with particular standards.

The ReadWorks website is clearly designed and user-friendly, providing teachers with an online “Binder” where they can save passages, lessons, and units that they may want to use or refer back to at a later date. The site can be accessed on a variety of digital platforms and works well on various browsers (Safari, Chrome, Firefox). It is also accessible via iPad.

As of August 2016, ReadWorks had over 2 million registered users.

**Resources on ReadWorks**

In addition to the reading passages discussed above, ReadWorks provides three types of lesson plan resources: Skill& Strategy Lesson Units, Comprehension Units, and Novel Study Units.

The Skill & Strategy Lesson Units are designed for grades K-4 and focus on grade-level reading skills and/or strategies. They contain lesson plans, texts and materials, and offer standards alignment. (While most lesson materials are available on the ReadWorks site, lessons based on literature require teachers to acquire the book separately.)
Comprehension Units for grades K-5 are based on “carefully selected books that will build background knowledge and vocabulary” and are designed to “facilitate precise questioning and focused discussion based on evidence in the text.” Each unit has a scripted read-aloud lesson and a paired text with questions requiring students to integrate knowledge from both texts.

ReadWorks also offers novel study units for grades 5 and 6. As of February 2017, there were five such units at each grade level. Available, too, are paired passages and text sets to promote vocabulary development and background knowledge, both of which have been shown to strengthen reading comprehension.

Part two of this review delves deeper into these resources, including their greatest strengths and areas of improvement.
PART TWO: READING THAT WORKS: PAIRING PASSAGES AND SETS OF TEXTS?

By Shannon Garrison

While ReadWorks offers a huge array of reading comprehension resources for educators, two particularly promising features are its paired passages and text sets for grades K-12. The former consist of two passages with similar topics and/or themes, while the text sets are comprised of three or more passages that share a topic or theme. Both resources can be used to build vocabulary and background knowledge in order to strengthen student reading comprehension and content knowledge.

**Paired Passages**

ReadWorks provides teachers with paired passages to help build vocabulary and background knowledge around a specific topic. The reasoning behind each pairing is clearly stated and sets of questions that assess student learning and comprehension accompany each pair. Questions focus on each passage individually and then on the integration of knowledge from both passages.

For example, one 8th grade U.S. History text pair includes the passages *Frederick Douglass: from Slavery to Freedom* and *Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow*. ReadWorks explains that “these texts have been paired because they both address the historical struggle for equal rights of African Americans.” Paired text question sets follow:

- Compare the impact that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige had on African Americans’ rights. Use evidence from both texts to support your comparison.
- Contrast the ways that Frederick Douglass and Satchel Paige helped to achieve positive changes for African Americans. Use evidence from both texts to support your answer.

Teachers can search for paired passages in the same way they search for individual passages – by keyword, grade, lexile level, topic, text type, and skill/strategy. They can also filter results to identify passages that contain vocabulary, questions, and/or a “StepReads” version of the original passage that is more manageable for struggling readers.
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Text Sets

In addition to paired texts, ReadWorks has developed about 40 text sets for grades K-12. Each contains three or more passages and focuses on a shared topic, theme, or structure. Each “text set includes a learning goal, key vocabulary, and questions for each text.” ReadWorks also supplies a text set learning goal with three additional questions that require the integration of knowledge from all passages.

Most of the text sets focus on nonfiction science and social studies topics and contain informational articles, biographies, essays, infographics, and speeches. They include authentic texts of varying structure, including articles from the New York Philharmonic, and excerpts from Ology – the American Museum of Natural History’s website for kids.

Unfortunately, it is challenging to find the text sets. Because they do not have their own section on the website, you find them by chance when searching through the paired passages.

ReadWorks also offers Article-a-Day, which is a “10-15 minute daily routine where students choose and read one high-quality nonfiction article every day, as part of a weekly, topically-related article set.” (These text sets are much easier to find as they have their own heading under Reading Passages.) While not necessarily on the exact same topic, the text sets appear to be thematically related (see weaknesses below). For example, one weekly article set entitled, “Health and Human Body” includes the articles: How Do Scrapes Heal?, Be Careful with Medicines, Learning About Your World, About Your Bones, How Your Ears Work, and Music in Your Ears.

ReadWorks provides great guidance for teachers on how to implement this daily routine and provides resources and lesson plan ideas, too.

Digital ReadWorks

ReadWorks recently released a new website that provides access to its passages and teacher resources using a digital platform. This allows teachers to find passages and then assign them to students, who can then read them and take assessments online. Passages are searchable by grade or lexile level, text type (informational text or literature), and product (articles, audio, paired texts, StepReads, and Article-a-Day).

Although it is a separate website, users will find many of the same features, passages, and lessons as are housed on the original ReadWorks website. Digital ReadWorks has also added features such as audio recordings and eBooks to support reading comprehension. Text sets, however, are unavailable on Digital ReadWorks.

Once students have read an assigned passage and submitted their assessment, the multiple-choice questions are auto scored. The constructed response items show up in the teacher’s account under Assignments, so they can score them. Teachers can see individual student and class results for any given passage. This may help teachers identify students who need extra help, track data trends to see if specific skills needs to be retaught, and determine their next steps in reading instruction. Students can also review assessment questions and track their individual results in their accounts.

While Digital ReadWorks is a terrific resource, teachers must assign reading passages to students. (Students cannot read passages on their own or self-select topics of interest.) It would be great to see a library of passages that are available for students to read if they so desire. Let’s hope Digital ReadWorks also makes the text sets available, as these are a valuable resource for teachers.
How Can Teachers Use ReadWorks Passage Pairs and Text Sets in Their Classrooms?

No matter the grade level or subject area, ReadWorks is a fine supplement to one’s reading curriculum, and there are many ways that it can be incorporated into a classroom.

Text pairs can be used to focus on a specific skill or strategy, such as vocabulary in context or drawing conclusions. Teachers can search by grade level and skill/strategy to find high-quality text pairs that can be used for classroom instruction, guided practice, or independent work. These passages can also be used for homework assignments so students can practice a specific skill or strategy on their own.

Paired passages can be used to focus on comparing and contrasting. They are also perfect for students to practice “analyzing how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take,” as called for by Common Core.

The site’s text pairs and text sets are a great way for teachers to supply background knowledge and vocabulary for students. These can be used prior to the start of a unit or to supplement instruction during the unit. For example, if a first grade teacher was planning an astronomy unit, he/she might include the ReadWorks text set that includes the articles, “Day to Night,” “Does the Moon Really Shine?” and “Why Don’t We See Stars in the Daytime?” All of these articles help to build background knowledge and vocabulary essential to understanding the first grade Earth and Space Science standards.

Finally, the “Article-a-Day” resources are 10-minute daily routines that use weekly text sets to build reading comprehension skills via four easy steps. First, the teacher sets the purpose for reading. This could include building vocabulary or simply gaining more knowledge of a topic. Next, the students read the passage independently. (Of course, kindergarten and first grade teachers can do a read aloud if necessary.) The third step is called “The Book of Knowledge” where students write or draw about one or two interesting things they learned from the passage. Finally, students can share what they learned with the class.

What are the Greatest Strengths of the ReadWorks Text Pairs and Sets?

ReadWorks’ greatest strength is that it provides teachers with quality, research-based literary and nonfiction passages, text pairs, and text sets – all at no cost. (see What are “text sets,” and why use them in the classroom? sidebar on page 11 for why text sets are so valuable.) It is often a struggle for teachers to find quality passages to supplement their curriculum. ReadWorks offers a huge number - over 2,600 - informational and literary passages from trusted sources.

ReadWorks is also user friendly. Of the various text set resources available online, this website is particularly well-organized. In a matter of minutes, teachers can find relevant passages and text pairs (not sets; see below) for their classes.
The passage pairs and text sets can be used to address many of the Common Core standards, such as analyzing multiple texts to build knowledge.

Many of the paired passages on ReadWorks also have “StepReads,” which are slightly more accessible versions of the original passage. This provides teachers with a way to differentiate the reading passage while providing all students the same content. As of October 2016, ReadWorks has developed at least one StepReads passage for approximately 280 of its 2,600 texts.

**How Might ReadWorks Be Improved?**

While ReadWorks' text sets are a wonderful resource, finding them is a big challenge (in contrast to the text pairs, which are more easily accessible). For example, a ReadWorks staff member emailed me a list of the 40+ text sets, but I could not find a way to specifically search for them on the website. The site would be much improved if its text sets were a more conspicuous feature.

The text sets themselves could be made more valuable for teachers if they supplied guidance on text order and some ideas for classroom implementation. Teachers have such limited time that it’s exceptionally helpful to have resources that suggest appropriate text order based on text complexity, vocabulary, and content. Lesson plans and suggested activities would further strengthen the text sets.

While the Article-a-Day routine is a great way to get students reading, the weekly text sets suffer because many of the articles in them are loosely related by theme rather than closely focused on the same topic. To build vocabulary and background knowledge, text sets need to be tightly focused.

A further shortcoming: the questions for each passage are not included in the Article-a-Day section, so teachers must search for the individual article to access the questions. It would definitely be handier for teachers if everything could be accessed in one place.

Another weakness is the inconsistency of resources available for ReadWorks passages. ReadWorks offers some amazing resources for teachers, including question sets, vocabulary, StepReads, and text pairs, but there is no consistency with regards to which passages have these resources. For example, some passages have only question sets and vocabulary, while others are missing question sets. While ReadWorks is adding new content all the time, this could be very frustrating for teachers if they find a passage that they would like to use, but then have no question set or no StepReads version to use with their struggling readers.

A weakness of the Digital ReadWorks site, as noted earlier, is its lack of text sets. While all other passages and text pairs are available on the new platform, text sets were left off (see Digital ReadWorks sidebar, page 19). This is really too bad, as text sets are such a great way to provide students with background knowledge and vocabulary to strengthen reading comprehension.
Conclusion

ReadWorks is a valuable resource that provides teachers with a wealth of reading comprehension resources at no cost. The passages, text sets, lessons, comprehension units, and novel study units are research-based and thoughtfully designed. While there is some inconsistency in terms of passage resources (questions, vocabulary, StepReads, Text Pairs, etc.), the passages are generally high quality and come from reputable sources. The paired passages and text sets have many classroom uses and are a fine way to build student vocabulary and content knowledge. ReadWorks is an excellent site for teachers seeking additional texts, text sets, and lessons to supplement their curriculum.