Common Core, and how to implement it, is the big discussion throughout the country. My state is fully implementing the English Language Arts standards next year, but the work of unpacking the standards and facing the meat of the objectives has already started. It can be overwhelming even with positive and continual guidance, so I’ve broken down the three key shifts in the English Language Arts Common Core Standards and provided a few baby steps to guide you when starting.

Key Shift #1

Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction

You teach nonfiction, right? Once a week you throw in that historical passage that numbs the kids' brains. You teach science and social studies, so surely they have nonfiction access. Isn’t there a book all about corn in the library you saw a student check out? So what’s the big deal? The fact is, as adults we rarely read fiction texts unless it is for pleasure. Jobs require huge amounts of reading and synthesizing of nonfiction texts. Think about the STEM careers we know our country needs to cultivate. Students who leave school unable to work with nonfiction may just be leaving unable to work at all.

Baby steps

Common Core calls for a 50-50 balance of fiction and nonfiction in reading. Use what you already have in math, science, and social studies and go from there. When you practice close reading, show
students how to break apart difficult passages to truly understand and comprehend. Make anchor charts of reading strategies that can help when they encounter problems. Become proactive in the library check-out, making sure students choose a variety of reading materials. Finding high-interest texts that support what you are already reading or studying can help. News articles aimed at students, from sources such as DynaMath or Junior Scholastic, can provide engaging material. Use these to spark an interest in your students and get rid of the "nonfiction is for nerds" mentality. Check out Scholastic's Common Sense for the Common Core for lessons, text recommendations, and even videos to get you started.

Key Shift #2

Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from the text, both literary and informational

We are all guilty of the easy question. You know the one: "Have you ever felt sleepy like Bear? Tell about a time you felt sleepy." What's the problem with this question? Well, frankly, we just don't care if you are sleepy or not. We care if you read and understood the text. Questions in Common Core need to be text-dependent, meaning that the student has to have read and understood the specific text the question comes from in order to answer. What's more, important vocabulary can be used in the question that a student must know. Our 2nd grade had a great example of this. The question was, "What in the text lets you know that George was an unusual child?" Not only do students have to have read and understood the passage, but they also need to know the meaning of "unusual."

Baby steps

Look at the tests you are already giving. While some directly stated questions have to be included, make sure you have a balance of inference questions. Check your open-ended questions. Did you ask something that relies on a student experience? Did you ask something they could make up, even if they hadn't fully understood what they read? Then it is time to write some text-dependent questions that assess student learning. Practice them throughout your lessons. Several good guides for text-dependent questions exist at achievethecore.org and through the Basal Alignment Project on Edmodo. Finished reading? Good, then write about it. Writing is folded into the Common Core ELA, so remember that student responses, thinking, recording, and presenting can be done through writing.
Key Shift #3

Regular practice with complex text and its academic language

You know that teaching from a basal alone doesn't give students the range of reading experience they need. Students have to read a variety of texts in order to be successful. Did you know that students also need practice with text that pushes them? Think about it: the only way we ever learned to read at a higher level was by reading something slightly more difficult than what we had previously read. Why then would we be content to let students go on reading at their comfort level without pushing them further? That is where text complexity comes into play. Students need to be able to read and comprehend specific academic vocabulary in the context of difficult text. Research on text complexity from Common Core Appendix A promotes a stair-step approach so that students are able to read at and beyond the college level when they graduate.

Baby steps

Kick it up a notch! Text-complexity doesn't necessarily mean longer reading, nonfiction text, or scientific wording. It is based on the structure, language convention and clarity, knowledge (literary) or purpose (informational) within the text. Keeping that in mind, use guided and close reading practice as an opportunity to push students to the next level. TextProject states that students who don't read at school are unlikely to read at home. In a typical classroom, students are only responsible for reading 20 percent of the time. If you increase that by just 7 minutes a day, you will create over 21 hours of reading in a 180-day school year. Make it harder, read for longer.

The Common Core isn't as daunting as it may seem. It is simply a reminder to teach what we know through good, engaging, and ever-more-challenging lessons every day. CoreStand lends some advice for becoming a Common Core Ninja. And if you need a fun reminder of why we are in it to win it, check out "Why We Need Common Core: I Choose C."

What resources have you used for preparing to teach the Common Core? What ELA lessons are working for you?