BookGist Summary

Confessions of an English Teacher Book 8

by Richard P. Sinay

Genre: Language Arts

Key Takeaways

• Sinay argues that the central purpose of English instruction should be improving students' literacy—not complying with a uniform checklist of standards or maximizing test scores.

• He views Common Core as a top-down reform that can limit teachers' ability to adapt instruction to students' reading levels, language backgrounds, and individual needs.

• In his experience, standards often outpaced classroom realities: teachers were expected to teach complex analysis, rhetoric, and argumentative writing without adequate training, aligned textbooks, or other resources.

• The book acknowledges that Common Core supporters sought consistent expectations across states, stronger college and career readiness, and more equitable academic rigor, while arguing that those goals are not enough to ensure effective implementation.

• Sinay supports teaching students to cite textual evidence, read nonfiction, write research papers, and practice informative, narrative, and argumentative writing—but says these skills require clear instruction and suitable materials.

• He questions whether some close-reading and literary-analysis standards are developmentally appropriate for average high school students, and favors literature students can understand and connect with.

• He recommends teaching grammar, mechanics, usage, and vocabulary in meaningful contexts—especially through reading and students' own writing—rather than relying mainly on isolated drills or word lists.

• Speaking, listening, and presentation skills can be developed through structured discussions, recitations, and oral presentations, but teachers need preparation and schools need the necessary resources.

• Sinay's practical alternative is stronger English-department planning: shared course outlines, prepared lesson materials, independent reading, sequenced vocabulary, and coordinated writing and language programs.

• The book's critique is grounded in the author's decades of teaching, but its forceful judgments are personal arguments; readers should distinguish his classroom observations from independently established evidence about Common Core's effects.

Who Should Read This Book

This book will be most useful to high school English teachers, department chairs, teacher educators, and parents who want a practitioner's critique of Common Core and standards-based instruction. New teachers may especially value Sinay's close readings of individual standards and his concrete suggestions for building shared course plans, reading programs, vocabulary instruction, and writing curricula. Experienced educators can use the book to prompt discussion about whether their standards, textbooks, assessments, and classroom resources actually align. Readers should approach it as a strongly argued account shaped by one teacher's decades of experience, not as a neutral or comprehensive research review. Its focus differs from broad education-policy books: it spends substantial time interpreting specific English Language Arts standards and describing the realities of teaching them. Those who agree with Common Core's goals may still find its questions about implementation and teacher preparation useful; readers seeking a balanced evidence synthesis should pair it with research and perspectives from educators who defend the standards.

Chapter Summaries

Preface

Sinay presents the book as a teacher's examination of whether Common Core standards can genuinely support literacy in real classrooms. He says he once tried to follow standards closely, but found a gap between official expectations and the practical work of teaching. In his account, some colleagues paid little attention to standards, while new teachers were often

left to interpret them without guidance. The intended audience includes parents, new and experienced English teachers, and departments required to implement the standards. Sinay aims both to criticize standards that he believes do not fit classroom needs and to offer workable interpretations of those that can be used. His guiding test is whether a standard advances students' reading, writing, and language abilities.

Introduction

The introduction frames the book as a veteran teacher's reading of Common Core's English Language Arts standards. Sinay doubts that demanding, complex tasks will bring average students to higher levels simply because a policy requires them. He compares this ambition to past assumptions that assigning exceptionally difficult literature would automatically elevate students' language skills. He previews the book's movement from the history and competing arguments about Common Core to standards for reading, writing, language, speaking, and listening. The final sections consider literature instruction and what English departments can do. Throughout, he asks whether standards are teachable with the materials and preparation teachers actually have.

Chapter 1: The History of Standards-Based Education

Sinay traces standards-based education from mid-century interest in higher-order thinking, including Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy, through A Nation at Risk, Goals 2000, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and No Child Left Behind. He describes how federal policy made standards and accountability increasingly prominent, while states developed benchmarks and standardized tests to assess students against them. He then outlines the creation of Common Core through the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc., with adoption encouraged in part by federal incentives. The chapter also describes the roles of the Smarter Balanced and PARCC assessment consortia, and the later state-level resistance, revisions, and rebranding. Sinay presents the reform as an effort to address inconsistent expectations, while emphasizing that its political and testing dimensions became contentious.

Chapter 2: Why I Oppose Common Core Standards

Sinay's central objection is that common standards impose a one-size-fits-all program on students whose abilities, language backgrounds, and interests differ. He argues that average and struggling readers need instruction and reading choices suited to their needs, rather than expectations that presume every student can reach the same level through exposure alone. He also criticizes standardized testing when the material assessed does not match what students have been taught. A recurring concern is the distance between ambitious standards and classroom support. Sinay says teachers are expected to teach advanced argumentative writing, rhetoric, grammar, and analysis without sufficient preparation or aligned materials. He also questions the assumption that standards can compensate for declining willingness to

read, drawing on his experience with students avoiding assigned books. His proposed priority is to build literacy through meaningful reading first, then writing, rather than letting standards and tests displace those aims.

Chapter 3: Arguments for Common Core

This chapter presents the case made by Common Core's proponents. A shared set of expectations, they argued, would make learning goals more consistent when students move between states and would replace uneven state benchmarks with a clearer national framework. Supporters also believed high school graduates needed stronger analytical, problem-solving, and writing skills to manage college coursework and modern workplaces. Other arguments included concerns that American students were falling behind on international assessments, that low expectations could conceal inequities affecting low-income and minority students, and that common goals would let states and publishers share resources. Sinay recognizes the appeal of consistent expectations and college readiness but challenges whether a common framework can create equity without equal support, teacher preparation, and suitable classroom materials.

Chapter 4: Academic Arguments Against Common Core

Sinay reviews objections from education critics, especially the argument that policy designed at the top does not translate neatly into classroom practice. He draws on Thomas Loveless's critique that standards-based reform can constrain teachers' flexibility, as well as his own observation that departments may continue teaching from textbooks and curricula that do not align with the standards. In this situation, teachers face competing directions rather than a coherent instructional plan. The chapter also discusses concerns attributed to Peter Gray and Thomas Armstrong: limited evidence of improved achievement, test-driven instruction, homogenized learning, excessive fragmentation into skills, and reduced attention to fiction and student experience. Sinay emphasizes that teachers may be asked to teach argumentative writing and complex analysis without training. He concludes that standards can contain reasonable goals yet fail when implementation, materials, and teacher discretion are neglected.

Chapter 5: Testing and Common Core Performance

Sinay examines standardized assessments and the controversy surrounding Common Core's outcomes. He describes early test-score drops and parent and teacher frustration, including opt-out activity and New York's replacement of its original Common Core-branded standards with revised Next Generation Learning Standards. He also notes that numerous states modified or renamed their frameworks, sometimes retaining much of the original structure. The author interprets national assessment results as evidence that Common Core did not produce the broad improvement its proponents expected. He connects this judgment to uneven implementation, varying teacher training, computer-based testing concerns, and the

standards' limited control over what curricula districts actually provide. The chapter presents his conclusion that the reform's impact is disputed and that the mere existence of common benchmarks does not establish that student learning has improved.

Chapter 6: Reading Standards for Informational Text 9–10

Sinay agrees that students should read nonfiction to build background knowledge and prepare to evaluate arguments, but he argues that informational reading needs to be supported with actual texts and purposeful assignments. He favors using content-area classes as an important setting for nonfiction and describes introducing a nonfiction research project at his own school. The chapter's main concern is that high school English textbooks often emphasize literature and provide too little material for the informational-text standards. His review of the standards distinguishes useful skills, such as citing evidence and examining vocabulary in context, from tasks he considers vague, excessively demanding, or of uncertain value for average students. He questions expectations involving rhetorical analysis, multiple media, workplace documents, and identifying fallacies when teachers may lack both training and resources. He recommends clearer guidance, suitable reading materials, and nonfiction writing assignments that give students something substantive to consider.

Chapter 7: Reading Standards for Informational Texts 11–12

The senior-grade standards again emphasize textual evidence, central ideas, vocabulary, text structure, authorial purpose, multiple sources, and the evaluation of arguments. Sinay supports students learning to use evidence and recognizes the value of context-based vocabulary and objective summaries. However, he asks what students are expected to produce—an oral response, a written analysis, or another kind of exercise—when standards describe a skill without clearly defining a classroom task. He is especially critical of expectations that students analyze legal reasoning, Supreme Court opinions, and complex foundational documents without adequate preparation. In his view, many historical and civic texts belong primarily in social studies, where teachers may have more relevant subject expertise. He recommends that English departments provide clear texts and assignments, and that nonfiction reading serve literacy and thoughtful writing rather than become an abstract exercise in dissecting documents.

Chapter 8: Reading Standards for Literature 9–10

Sinay considers the 9th- and 10th-grade literature standards too demanding for many average students. He examines requirements to cite evidence, draw inferences, trace themes, analyze character development, interpret word choice, and explain how authors structure stories. Using examples such as Huck Finn and The Scarlet Letter, he shows how a teacher might guide students from a conclusion about a character or theme to textual evidence supporting that interpretation. He accepts that these activities can suit advanced students but argues that they are not appropriate as universal expectations, especially when students are still

developing basic reading ability. Some requirements—such as comparing works across cultures and media or tracing literary source material—strike him as disconnected from the immediate goal of literacy. He favors teaching accessible literature with sustained guidance, rather than assuming that difficult texts and sophisticated analysis will automatically improve comprehension.

Chapter 9: Reading Standards for Literature 11–12

For upper-grade students, Sinay again sees potential in teaching evidence-based interpretation and themes, but stresses that students need explicit instruction to draw conclusions and turn them into claims supported by passages. His example of Huck Finn illustrates the process: a reading-based conclusion about Huck's lies can become a thesis, with specific episodes serving as evidence. He argues that this process is taught, not acquired simply by assigning a novel. He disputes standards asking students to analyze authors' structural choices, compare interpretations across productions, or demonstrate broad historical knowledge of American literature when the purpose and expected learning are unclear. Sinay also questions whether complex canonical works suit students whose reading levels may lag behind their grade. His alternative is not to abandon literature, but to choose texts students can comprehend and to make literary study serve reading growth and meaningful writing.

Chapter 10: Writing Standards for Grades 9–10

Sinay reviews standards for argumentative, informative, and narrative writing, along with coherence, revision, technology, research, source use, textual evidence, and writing regularly. He considers many of these goals worthwhile. Students should learn to form claims, support them with evidence, organize information, tell stories, revise drafts, conduct research, cite sources, and write both over extended periods and under shorter deadlines. His strongest caution concerns teacher preparation. Argumentative writing requires knowledge of claims, counterclaims, evidence, and rhetorical appeals, yet Sinay believes many English teachers were not trained to teach these effectively. He urges teachers to model writing and guide students through the process together, particularly for revision and research. The standards are most useful, he argues, when departments provide models, shared materials, and instruction that connects writing skills to real assignments.

Chapter 11: Writing Standards for Grades 11–12

The senior writing standards largely repeat the earlier grades' expectations at greater complexity. They call for argument, informative explanation, narrative writing, coherent organization, revision, technology-supported publication, sustained research, credible sources, evidence from texts, and writing across different time frames. Sinay endorses many of these aims, especially research writing, varied forms of composition, and the expectation that students revise and meet deadlines. He again identifies argumentative writing as the

most demanding component for teachers and students. Teaching it well requires an understanding of how to construct a claim, support it, address opposing arguments, and use evidence and rhetorical methods. Sinay's conclusion is that the standards are reasonable in principle, but their success depends on whether teacher education programs and English departments prepare instructors to teach composition rather than leave them to learn it by trial and error.

Chapter 12: Language Standards 9–10

This chapter addresses grammar, usage, punctuation, spelling, syntax, vocabulary, and figurative language. Sinay argues that language instruction is most durable when connected to reading and students' own writing, rather than limited to isolated grammar exercises or vocabulary lists. He supports helping students infer word meaning from context and believes reading regularly contributes to spelling and language development. He questions whether teachers have the reference books, curriculum, and professional development needed to teach standards that invoke contested usage, sentence variety, and formal grammatical knowledge. A classroom anecdote about a student whose polished computer-edited papers did not reflect her unaided writing illustrates his concern that proofreading software can conceal gaps in students' independent skills. Sinay recommends a coordinated language program, with explicit instruction integrated into writing and reading.

Chapter 13: Language Standards 11–12

The senior language standards call for command of grammar and usage, conventions of spelling and punctuation, flexible syntax, vocabulary strategies, understanding figurative language, and independent vocabulary growth. Sinay repeats his view that these expectations can be meaningful if students encounter them in context. He favors drawing vocabulary from assigned readings and using contextual clues, word roots, dictionaries, and other references to deepen understanding. He criticizes the lack of resources and training that can make the standards difficult to teach, particularly when standards cite specialized reference works or expect teachers to teach sentence style without preparation. He also cautions that word-processing and AI tools may improve a finished draft without ensuring that students have learned the underlying skills. The chapter concludes that departments should combine instruction in conventions with attention to students' actual writing and establish consistent language teaching across grade levels.

Chapter 14: Speaking and Listening Standards Grades 9–10

Sinay considers discussion, listening, source evaluation, presentations, and use of digital media important, but argues that English teachers need preparation to teach them. He supports collaborative discussions in which students use research, engage with different views, and develop ideas together. He also sees potential in evaluating speakers and integrating information from varied media, provided assignments are structured and resources

are available. For presentations, the chapter describes oral argument as a demanding task that depends on prior instruction in writing and rhetoric. Sinay suggests practical activities such as reciting and interpreting a poem, using group presentations, and providing students regular opportunities to speak. He cautions that sophisticated media projects are not feasible without equipment and financial support, so the requirements should reflect the school's capacity.

Chapter 15: Speaking and Listening Standards Grades 11–12

The senior standards continue to emphasize prepared discussion, respectful collaboration, evaluation of sources and speakers, reasoned presentations, digital media, and adapting speech to different settings. Sinay strongly approves of structured peer discussion, where students can test ideas and respond to evidence without always having to speak before the entire class. He also explains that listening can be taught through note-taking and having students reconstruct or explain information from their notes. His classroom examples include memorizing and interpreting a Shakespearean sonnet and delivering a senior speech. He sees these tasks as ways to build language, confidence, and public speaking ability, but argues that teachers need training and schools must provide appropriate resources. He suggests that regular oral presentations and recitations can meet much of the practical need, provided the assignments are taught rather than simply required.

Chapter 16: Common Core and Literature

Sinay focuses on how Common Core's literary standards shape text selection and interpretation. He questions the requirement to compare versions of a story or play across formats, arguing that the standard can become an unclear exercise unless teachers guide students toward a meaningful comparison. He also asks what knowledge students should gain from studying literary periods and how that learning will be assessed. The broader concern is that students are expected to read highly complex literature while the standards also reduce the amount of classroom time devoted to literature. Sinay argues that chronological surveys and canonical works may not serve students whose reading skills need further development. He favors a deliberate literature program using texts students can understand, while criticizing standards that ask students to analyze authorial choices without explaining why that task advances their literacy.

Chapter 17: What the English Departments Should Do with Common Core

Sinay shifts from criticism to organizational recommendations. English departments, he argues, should create course descriptions, shared course outlines, unit plans, lesson materials, assessments, and answer keys so teachers—especially newcomers—do not have to build a curriculum alone. He recommends leadership with strong subject expertise and coordinated planning across grade levels. His proposed programs include independent reading, with books selected to match students' reading abilities; vocabulary drawn from

course readings; and a writing curriculum that includes literary, informative, argumentative, narrative, and research assignments. He also calls for grammar and mechanics instruction linked to student writing, a broader language program that includes sentence combining, and ready-to-use lesson plans. In his view, department-level planning converts broad standards into teachable work and gives teachers time to focus on student learning.

Conclusion

Sinay's closing assessment is that Common Core includes some worthwhile goals but does not provide enough support to make them consistently workable. He values nonfiction reading, writing instruction, and opportunities to develop language, yet argues that standards without texts, materials, teacher preparation, or a coherent curriculum leave educators to improvise. He also regrets the reduced emphasis on independent reading, which he considers essential to language growth. The conclusion returns to the book's main principle: literacy develops through appropriate reading and instruction, not through imposing increasingly complex tasks by decree. Sinay calls for better preparation in composition, reading, grammar, speaking, and listening, as well as concrete support from state and district leaders. Ultimately, he wants standards and curriculum to serve classroom learning rather than become ends in themselves.

Notable Quotes

> *"“The goal of teaching English is to advance students' literacy.”"*

> *"“English teachers, not academic know-it-alls, should write standards.”"*

> *"“Literacy comes first through reading, then writing.”"*

> *"“One cannot practice a skill without the materials to practice it.”"*

> *"“The standards do not align with the curriculum teachers are teaching.”"*

Full Summary

Richard P. Sinay presents his case as a veteran English teacher who believes education has lost sight of its central purpose: improving students' literacy. Common Core may help some students, he allows, but a uniform set of requirements is less effective than instruction tailored to students' reading levels, language backgrounds, and needs. Top-down reforms, he argues, cannot substitute for the practical knowledge of teachers who know their classrooms. During his career, some colleagues ignored standards, while Sinay tried to follow them and found that the expectations did not work well in practice. Teachers could be expected to comply, sometimes under threat of disciplinary action, without receiving the training or materials

needed to teach what the standards demanded. He writes for parents and new and experienced teachers, hoping to explain the standards and offer guidance rather than leave educators to interpret them alone.

Sinay traces standards-based education to a broader shift away from rote memorization and toward higher-order thinking. As a college student in the 1960s, he heard about Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives. Later, the Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education issued A Nation at Risk, and subsequent administrations made education reform a political priority. National education goals, the Clinton-era Goals 2000 legislation, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act all contributed to the movement. The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act made standards and accountability central to federal policy, requiring states to establish benchmarks and test students against them. Each state created its own standards, and testing companies measured performance, with results reported to schools and the public. Although accountability was presented as a way to improve education, parents and students often resented the emphasis on prescribed instruction and the resulting loss of room for creative teaching.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, became the nation's "report card," sampling students in grades four, eight, and twelve to track reading and mathematics across states. Sinay notes that, before Common Core, NAEP scores had generally held steady or made modest gains. The Common Core State Standards Initiative arose from a different concern: states' varying expectations made it difficult to know whether students graduating in one place were prepared for college or careers elsewhere. In 2008, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve recommended shared, internationally benchmarked standards; the initiative launched in 2010. Adoption was voluntary, though federal incentives through Race to the Top encouraged it. By 2014, forty-five states and the District of Columbia had adopted the standards. Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia never did, while some states later repealed, revised, or rebranded their versions.

Assessments were built to match the new standards. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium developed computer-adaptive tests, adjusting question difficulty according to a student's answers. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers created online tests with more fixed questions and performance tasks requiring written explanations and analysis. Both aimed to move beyond conventional multiple-choice testing and assess reasoning, problem-solving, and analytical skills.

Sinay's central objection is that standardization treats students as if one program can serve them all. Average and below-average students, he argues, need reading programs suited to their abilities and cultural and linguistic backgrounds, not simply the same textbook and

expectations given to everyone. Standards also assume that every student can reach the same academic level if pushed, an assumption that ignores differences in ability and the particular needs of special-education and second-language learners. In his phrase, requiring every student to “come up to Shakespeare” cannot make that outcome realistic. Literacy, he insists, matters more than uniform compliance or the testing industry’s ability to measure performance.

He sees a serious mismatch between what teachers cover and what standardized tests ask students to do. He recalls questions about rhetorical devices that students had never been taught. Tests might require students to identify a text’s central idea, analyze figurative language or parallel structure, assess arguments and fallacies, and write essays drawing evidence from several passages. Yet teachers often lacked textbooks, instructional materials, and training for those tasks. Argumentative writing was a particularly stark example: students were expected to write argumentative essays, although many English teachers had not learned how to teach them in college. For Sinay, imposing standards without resources leaves a damaging gap between policy and classroom practice.

Supporters of Common Core offered several reasons for a shared framework. Consistent expectations could help students who move between states, and common benchmarks could make achievement more transparent. Advocates also argued that high school instruction often failed to prepare students for college writing and workplace demands. Colleges encountered students unable to construct an argumentative essay and responded with remedial courses. Common Core aimed to strengthen critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving, while ensuring that students’ preparation would not depend so heavily on where they lived. Its proponents believed rigorous common expectations could expose gaps that low state standards might conceal, particularly for low-income and minority students, and provide a more equitable level of academic challenge. They also hoped states and publishers could pool resources to produce better textbooks, digital tools, assessments, and professional development. Sinay recognizes the appeal of these goals, but notes that shared standards alone do not guarantee equal funding, appropriate materials, or capable instruction. He also argues that colleges helped create the writing problem by failing to prepare future teachers to teach composition.

Among academic critics, Thomas Loveless argues that standards reform is inherently top-down: policy elites and content specialists design expectations, but the system does not reliably translate them into classroom practice. Coordination at the top can constrain teachers’ flexibility to adapt lessons to students. Sinay connects this criticism to the mismatch between standards and textbooks, which may emphasize literature while tests demand informational reading, grammar, rhetoric, and writing instruction. At one school where he taught, teachers rarely discussed standards and often spent a semester on a single paper or play, yet students’ test scores improved. Peter Gray, another critic cited by Sinay, notes that NAEP

scores rose gradually before Common Core was implemented, then showed no comparable progress afterward. Gray also argues that drill and pressure cannot force genuine engagement or understanding.

Thomas Armstrong criticizes Common Core for homogenizing education, prioritizing skills over content, and fragmenting learning into detailed requirements. He objects to “close reading,” which Sinay describes as rooted in New Criticism: a method that privileges the text itself over an author’s background, historical context, or students’ personal responses. Armstrong also warns that the standards favor nonfiction over fiction, make test preparation a dominant purpose of instruction, and lack adequate financial support. Sinay returns repeatedly to the absence of classroom teachers from the standards’ development and to the danger of asking educators to carry out requirements they were never trained to teach.

The testing record, Sinay argues, has not delivered the promised broad improvements. He cites flat or declining results and research finding no consistent achievement gains in states adopting Common Core compared with those that did not. Early New York test results brought steep score drops, parental anxiety, teacher frustration, and an opt-out movement involving tens of thousands of students. New York eventually replaced the Common Core name and revised its standards as the Next Generation Learning Standards, while retaining parts of the framework. Other states similarly modified or renamed their standards. Critics see the weak test results as evidence that top-down reform failed; supporters maintain that the standards may show benefits over a longer period. That dispute, however, does not resolve the practical question Sinay keeps pressing: what can students be expected to demonstrate when the instruction and materials to prepare them are missing?

Turning from test results to the standards themselves, Sinay finds some value in the push for informational reading. Students need nonfiction to build knowledge, or schema, that helps them understand what they read; they should encounter it in content classes as well as English. He recalls that seniors at his school were assigned a so-called research paper comparing two poems. He replaced that task with a nonfiction reading and research paper, believing students needed to investigate subjects and develop ideas they could argue about. In that respect, the Common Core’s greater emphasis on nonfiction and research strikes him as a worthwhile change.

The informational-reading standards for grades nine and ten ask students to cite textual evidence, determine central ideas, trace how an author develops ideas, interpret words in context, examine text structure and features, identify point of view and rhetoric, compare accounts across media, evaluate arguments, and read significant American documents. Sinay strongly supports citing evidence to support a claim, whether students do so in discussion or in writing. But he stresses that the skill requires texts to practice on, and high-school English textbooks are usually dominated by literature, with too little nonfiction. Standards cannot

supply the missing essays, workplace documents, or other materials themselves.

He questions the purpose and clarity of several requirements. Asking students to trace the sequence and development of an author's ideas seems to him like needless dissection unless teachers can explain what literacy benefit it brings. Determining word meaning in context could be useful, especially before reading, but students need suitable passages and instruction. Analyzing rhetoric, he argues, is a demanding skill that average high-school students may not be ready for, and identifying fallacies requires substantial background knowledge even many teachers lack. He also objects to comparing a subject presented in print and multimedia, asking where teachers are supposed to find multiple versions and what the exercise contributes to literacy. By contrast, he approves of reading foundational documents such as Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—provided teachers receive the materials. For older students, he questions why English teachers should be responsible for legal and historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which history teachers may be better equipped to teach. Across both grade bands, his test is practical: nonfiction should give students something meaningful to think about and write about, not become a list of abstract analytical tasks.

The standards for informational reading in grades eleven and twelve intensify the demands. Students must identify several central ideas and explain how they interact, assess an author's structure and rhetoric, combine information from different media, and evaluate reasoning in complex texts, including Supreme Court opinions and works such as The Federalist. Sinay again endorses evidence-based claims and sees value in vocabulary work that clarifies meaning before reading. He considers objective summaries useful, but asks what students are expected to produce and how teachers should guide the exercise. Other requirements, such as explaining how a complex sequence of events develops or judging constitutional reasoning, seem far beyond many high-school students. He also argues that historical and legal texts belong naturally in social studies, while English classes should use nonfiction that engages students and supports their own writing.

Sinay's misgivings about the literary standards are sharper still. For grades nine and ten, students are asked to support analysis with evidence, draw inferences, trace themes, explain complex characters, examine word choices and structure, compare cultural perspectives, and analyze a scene represented in different forms. Sinay acknowledges that students can learn to cite evidence, but says teachers must first show them how to form a conclusion and turn it into a claim. He illustrates the process through Huckleberry Finn: a reader might conclude that Huck lies to protect himself and Jim, then find incidents in the novel that support that interpretation. This, he says, is a demanding literary-paper skill, suitable for honors or advanced students but difficult for average readers without close guidance.

He doubts that all students need to analyze how a complex character advances a plot or how an author manipulates time to create suspense. Such tasks, he argues, can turn English into advanced literary criticism rather than literacy instruction. He uses The Scarlet Letter to show the challenge of identifying and tracing a theme such as sin through Hester Prynne, Roger Chillingworth, and Arthur Dimmesdale. Average students may struggle to interpret the novel at all, let alone analyze the theme's development. Similarly, comparing a poem with a painting, drawing on world literature, or tracing how Shakespeare transforms classical or biblical sources may have a place in advanced study but not as universal expectations. Sinay favors literature students can understand and connect with; difficult texts do not become accessible simply because standards demand analysis.

For grades eleven and twelve, the literary expectations include identifying several themes, evaluating an author's choices about setting and plot, interpreting irony and satire, comparing multiple versions of a work, and demonstrating knowledge of major American literature across several centuries. Sinay accepts that students should support interpretations with textual evidence and learn to identify themes, but says those abilities require direct teaching and time. In his reading of the standards, students are too often asked to infer why an author began or ended a story in a particular way, or to compare a novel with a performance, without a clear connection to improving their literacy. He also questions the expectation that students read texts at the high end of the grade-level complexity range when many are not yet reading confidently. He prefers a deliberate literature program matched to students' linguistic abilities, rather than assuming every class can manage the same demanding works.

The writing standards, by contrast, contain goals Sinay largely supports, even as he warns that teachers may not be prepared to teach them. For grades nine and ten, students are expected to write arguments with claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence; produce informative explanations and narratives; organize coherent writing for audience and purpose; revise through a process; conduct research; use multiple sources and cite them; draw evidence from reading; and write both over extended periods and under shorter deadlines. Sinay considers argumentative writing essential for college, but says it requires teachers to understand rhetoric and teach students how to build a thesis, select evidence, and address opposing claims. Many English teachers, he argues, were never trained to teach this work.

He sees informative and narrative writing as appropriate and teachable with clear models. Students should study a strong example of an informative essay, then work through the process themselves; narrative writing should likewise be modeled with the class before students write independently. Coherence and transitions need explicit instruction, and revision should involve feedback and real rewriting, not merely a final check for errors. He endorses research papers, including sustained projects drawing on several authoritative sources, while noting that students need to learn how to avoid plagiarism and integrate evidence smoothly. He finds the standard about drawing evidence from texts incomplete unless students first

develop a thesis to guide what evidence they seek. Writing should also happen on both long and short timelines, so students learn to reflect and revise without treating every paper as an unlimited project.

The grades eleven and twelve writing standards are nearly the same. They again call for argumentative, informative, and narrative writing, revision, research, source evaluation, citation, and regular practice. Sinay supports these forms, but regards successful implementation as dependent on teacher preparation. The standards offer worthwhile aims, he says, yet asking teachers to meet them without training in composition and rhetoric leaves a serious gap between what students are expected to write and what their instruction can provide.

Sinay's examination of the language standards returns to a central question: how can students learn grammar, usage, spelling, mechanics, and vocabulary effectively when teachers lack suitable training and materials? He argues that these skills should usually be taught through reading and students' own writing, not as disconnected exercises. The standards ask students to command standard English grammar and usage, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling, and to make deliberate choices about language and style. Sinay considers those aims reasonable, but says teachers need resources and a coherent program to meet them. A literature textbook that barely addresses grammar or usage cannot, by itself, support the work.

He illustrates the gap between polished work and genuine command with a junior honors student whose submitted papers appeared flawless, apparently corrected by word-processing software. When Sinay asked the class to write by hand in a timed exercise, the student's work contained many errors. In a later paragraph written without the class's knowledge, she made twenty errors on one page. The episode convinces him that editing tools can conceal weaknesses rather than teach students how to write. He believes teachers should use students' drafts to teach mechanics and usage in context, while recognizing that technology can make errors harder to detect.

The vocabulary standards recommend using context, word parts, dictionaries, glossaries, and other references to determine meaning. Sinay favors building a department-wide vocabulary program from the words students encounter in their reading, arguing that words are learned more effectively in sentences than in isolated lists. He also supports teaching figurative language through poetry, where students can see how it works in a text, and reading aloud so students hear how unfamiliar words sound. For grades eleven and twelve, he additionally notes the expectation that students recognize Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon roots and affixes. His broader point is that language grows through purposeful use: a program should connect vocabulary, reading, speaking, and writing rather than treating words as a list to memorize.

Sinay is more welcoming toward the speaking and listening standards, especially their call for students to take part in discussions, come prepared with research, listen to differing views, and respond thoughtfully. He sees small-group and paired discussion as useful because they allow students to exchange ideas without always having to speak before the entire class. Students might also combine information from different media, assess a speaker's reasoning, or present a supported argument. But he cautions that a formal persuasive presentation requires instruction in argument, and that success depends on whether teachers have been prepared to teach those skills. Using digital media is worthwhile only when schools have the necessary equipment and resources.

For oral practice, Sinay describes having students memorize Shakespearean sonnets, write an interpretation, and recite the poem to the class. He also endorses individual and group presentations, and suggests that at least one oral presentation each quarter is enough to give students meaningful practice. In senior classes, he assigned a speech for students to deliver near the end of the year. Listening can be taught, too: students can take notes during a lecture and use those notes to explain what they heard. Yet Sinay emphasizes that English teachers were not necessarily trained in speech instruction, and he questions why the state sets these expectations without providing lessons or guidance. Some responsibilities, he suggests, may belong to a speech teacher.

His discussion of literature challenges standards that ask students to compare multiple interpretations of a work, including a written text and its screen adaptation. He questions what students are meant to learn when they are expected to interpret a novel and then produce a separate interpretation of the film. He also finds the expectations concerning centuries of American and British literature unclear: standards do not specify what students should know about the authors, periods, or works, or how that knowledge will be assessed. More broadly, he objects to asking average students to analyze how authors arrange plots, introduce characters, or choose endings. Such assignments, he argues, can turn literature into technical dissection instead of helping students understand stories and write about what they mean.

Sinay's alternative is not to abandon literature, but to choose works students can comprehend and connect with. He questions the assumption that complex texts automatically improve literacy, particularly when many students are reading below the level of the assigned books. A chronological survey, with American literature in eleventh grade and British literature in twelfth, can constrain teaching; the usual texts include Arthur Miller's The Crucible and Shakespeare's Hamlet. Sinay argues that reading beyond students' linguistic reach may discourage them rather than help them grow. A purposeful literature program should encourage independent reading and match books to students' abilities, so that they can experience success and want to read more.

For English departments, he calls first for organization and shared preparation. Departments should create clear course descriptions and detailed outlines for every course, specifying the instructional sequence, timing, materials, tests, and other resources. A new teacher should not have to invent a curriculum alone. Sinay believes department heads should hold master's degrees in their subject, and argues that planning should extend beyond grade-level coordination to include complete course materials. He recalls helping a new teacher who felt unable to teach American literature chronologically by giving her his lesson plans, unit materials, and test. A department that had already prepared such materials could have made that support routine rather than dependent on his intervention.

He also recommends an independent-reading program, noting that the standards call for students to read two million words outside class by the end of high school. Departments should make books available, understand students' reading levels, and select literature they can read successfully. Vocabulary instruction should draw, where possible, on those readings rather than random lists. Each grade should also include planned writing in narrative, informative, and argumentative forms, with about four substantial papers annually—one each quarter—and instruction in grammar and mechanics connected to students' drafts. A language program can include sentence combining to develop variety and sophistication. Together, these plans would let teachers focus on literacy instead of improvising under a long list of disconnected expectations.

Sinay's final judgment is that the standards contain worthwhile aims, but their value depends on training, materials, and classroom realities. Reading nonfiction can build background knowledge, and students should write in response to it; yet teachers cannot teach informational reading effectively if they receive only literature texts. Writing instruction likewise demands preparation that many English teachers have not received, while speaking and listening standards arrive without adequate guidance. Grammar and mechanics cannot be fixed by treating language as an isolated subject when reading itself helps students learn how words and punctuation work. The state, he argues, should not impose standards and then leave teachers to construct the curriculum and resources themselves while facing full classrooms. The purpose of English instruction remains to make students more literate: to put readable books in their hands, teach them how to use language, and give them the support to read, write, speak, and think with growing confidence.

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