



# College and Career Readiness Standards-in-Action

Foundational  
Unit

3

FACILITATOR GUIDE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY

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## IDENTIFYING QUESTIONS WORTH ANSWERING

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## Background and Purpose

The College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for Adult Education in English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy exemplify three key advances in instruction prompted by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This unit provides adult educators with an introduction to *evidence*—the second of these three advances—and the important role it plays in the CCR Standards.

The previous unit provided information and practice on how to select complex texts that are appropriate for adult students. This unit focuses on applying questions worth answering to those complex texts. In particular, this unit provides adult educators an introduction to the concept of text-dependent questions.

Research has shown the ability to extract and use evidence is integral to effective preparation for college and careers. Postsecondary educators expect students to enter college able to “support claims with multiple and appropriate sources of evidence.”<sup>1</sup> They also stress the importance of “identifying, evaluating, and using evidence” as central to the academic experience of students in college.<sup>2</sup> These skills span the range of activities students are asked to perform. Students must be able to use evidence to support their position during classroom discussion and debates. The demands of college-level writing require students to deploy evidence they have gathered from what they have read.

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<sup>1</sup>2009 ACT National Curriculum Survey; Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002; and *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. American Diploma Project, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>2009 ACT National Curriculum Survey; Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California, 2002; and *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. American Diploma Project, 2004.

The importance of evidence is inescapable in any postsecondary setting.

This “evidence-focused” skill set nurtured in college is equally sought after by employers in the 21st-century workplace. As Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney (n.d.) of the University of Chicago Writing Program report:

“In just about any profession [students] pursue, [they] will do research, think about what [they] find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions—usually in writing—to others who have a stake in [their] decisions being sound ones.”<sup>3</sup>

The ability to gather evidence from text and to answer text-dependent questions is critical for college and career readiness. Students must be able to identify and analyze central ideas and key supporting details. They must be able to understand the meanings of individual words and sentences and the significance of the order, sequence, and structure of sentences. Without these core skills, students will be unable to productively compare and synthesize ideas in their speaking and writing.

As a result of these findings, Key Advance 2 in the CCR Standards prioritizes students’ ability to locate and use evidence from texts. It targets instruction on students’ ability to cite evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information.

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<sup>3</sup>Williams, J. M., & McEnerney, L. (n.d.). *Writing in college: A short guide to college writing*. Retrieved from <http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/index.htm>.

The importance of this skill is manifest in the standards themselves:

- Reading Standard 1 requires students to cite evidence and make inferences based on the evidence to “support conclusions drawn from the text.”
- Writing Standards 7-9 require students to analyze sources for evidence and conduct evidence-based research.
- Speaking and Listening Standard 1 requires students to contribute accurate, relevant information when speaking.

These standards demand students answer questions based on their clear understanding of what the text actually says and implies.

This unit prepares adult educators by allowing them to work together to learn how to identify and ultimately create “questions worth answering.” It develops in educators an appreciation of how powerful questions can be in activating students’ abilities to focus carefully on complex texts, collect the evidence needed to support their claims and conclusions, and become better readers.

## Overview

This unit will allow participants to investigate in depth Key Advance 2: Drawing evidence from texts through sequences of text-dependent questions. Using the text they investigated previously for text complexity (*The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*), participants will analyze a set of questions tied to that text by various criteria.

They will learn how to identify non-text-dependent questions from text-dependent questions. They also will learn how to identify text-dependent questions that are valuable and worth answering—questions that go beyond recall. Participants

will learn the importance of text-dependent questions as a tool for developing students' reading comprehension skills. This will help them make a direct link between text-dependent questions and the instructional scaffolding that such questions provide to students to successfully comprehend a text—especially students struggling with the complexity and nuances of a text. A supplemental text and a second “questions worth answering” activity, based on a speech by Eleanor Roosevelt, accompany this unit for further practice, or when more than 90 minutes can be devoted to training.

## Materials You Need

For Participants (one copy per participant):

- Directions for Participants
- Worksheet: Identifying Questions Worth Answering: *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Resource: Excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*

Supplemental Materials for Additional Practice (one copy per participant):

- Worksheet: Identifying Questions Worth Answering: Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union
- Resource: Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union

For Facilitators:

- Unit 3 PowerPoint Presentation: Identifying Questions Worth Answering
- Answer Key: Identifying Questions Worth Answering: *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Answer Key: Identifying Questions Worth Answering: Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union

## Time Frame to Complete the Unit

Allow **90 minutes** for this unit, using the following guidance to help divide the time:

- 20 minutes – Introduce the unit.
- 50 minutes – Work in pairs or small groups to complete the activity.
- 20 minutes – Discuss reflections.

NOTE: If you are going to add the Eleanor Roosevelt speech for another practice opportunity, allow another 30-45 minutes for that work.

## Guidelines for Implementation

### Step 1: Preparations

- a) Create small groups of participants, ideally with four to eight at each table.** The maximum size of a group for this session depends on your space, need, and comfort level. A guiding principle is to make sure the group is small enough that you can be in touch with each table of participants to determine whether they understand the concepts and are fully engaged or they are struggling and need more support.
- b) For best results, select table leaders in advance or ask each table of participants during the session to choose one person to be their lead.** The table leader will be responsible for keeping track of time, bringing participants together at the appropriate times, making certain participants are moving along, sharing information at appropriate times, and notifying you when there are questions or the group needs more support. (If table leaders are selected in advance provide them with copies of the PowerPoint Presentation, handouts, and answer key so they can prepare for the session.)

- c) **As a general strategy, be prepared to circulate around the room when participants are working individually or in pairs.** Circulating will allow you to check on their understanding and be readily available to answer questions.
- d) **Conduct the Identifying Questions Worth Answering: *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* activity.** This will help you understand the steps you are asking participants to go through.
- e) **Prepare the materials for participants.** Copy the excerpt on colored paper so that participants can spot it easily.
- f) **Become familiar with the PowerPoint Presentation and materials, including the answer key.** This will allow you to be at ease with the information and flow of the unit. Detailed notes are provided within the PowerPoint Presentation to help you prepare for the session. In particular, notes for each slide include the identification of the Big Idea, Facilitator Talking Points, and Facilitator Notes. These can help you frame your presentation and provide you important detail and context. This information is coupled with the information offered in this Facilitator Guide—including the research base, rationale, advice, and other guidelines—to give you the support and guidance you require.

The answer key is for your edification and is not meant to be handed out to participants. The key includes “right” answers, but not necessarily the only right answers; it includes well-supported judgments that will guide you as you reflect on participant questions and answers.



**Step 2: Implementation** (20 minutes to introduce; 50 additional minutes working in pairs or small groups)

**Introduce the three key advances in the CCR Standards for ELA/Literacy.**

**Slides 2-3:** Remind participants of the three key advances and how they interact and build up to college and career readiness. While Unit 3 emphasizes Key Advance 2 (Evidence), it is important to understand that the CCR Standards were developed to reflect and exemplify the three keys advances of increasing text complexity, prioritizing evidence when reading and writing, and building knowledge.

Remind participants that in Unit 2 the focus was on providing students with access to more complex texts to prepare them for the rigors of college and career-level reading.

In this unit, the focus will be on close reading and the importance of asking text-dependent questions that require students to draw evidence from those complex texts. Providing students with ways to delve into and re-examine a text through good questions affords students with the supports they need to comprehend the ideas and information contained within complex texts. Asking students to collect evidence while they read also contributes to their ability to learn from what they have read.

The subsequent unit will introduce the concept of building knowledge. To cultivate their knowledge base, students must read and write regularly about complex texts that offer them new vocabulary, new ideas, and new modes of thought. Well-crafted culminating writing assignments tied to content-rich texts can assist students in collecting and expanding their knowledge.

It is the interaction of these key advances within the CCR Standards as students move up the levels that will prepare

adult learners for college and careers. When students engage with *complex text* and extract and employ *evidence* from those texts, they gain *knowledge*, enlarge their experience, and broaden their worldviews.

**Introduce the concept of text-dependent questions.**

**Slide 4:** Present the objectives of the unit: 1) to develop an appreciation for text-dependent questions; 2) to learn how good questions help students collect the evidence they need to support their claims and conclusions about texts; and 3) to practice identifying questions about an authentic text to learn how text-dependent questions inform instruction. Emphasize the role of evidence in the CCR Standards for Adult Education in building excellent reading comprehension.

**Slide 5:** When referencing research, note findings from the ACT National Curriculum study and American Diploma Project that support focusing on extracting and using evidence as a critical college and career readiness skill. Surveys from postsecondary faculty as well as employers in the 21st-century workplace expect students to be able to use evidence to support their position in discussions as well as in writing.

**Slide 6:** An array of standards focus on the need for students to be able to answer text-dependent questions in classroom settings to demonstrate their comprehension of what they are reading. These standards inform instruction by channeling teaching toward asking students to provide evidence from their reading to support their claims instead of relying primarily on background knowledge or experience. There is also a strong connection between asking questions about texts and helping students to comprehend difficult material. When students are regularly exposed to sequences of text-dependent questions that build on one another, they, in turn, build important habits of self-questioning when faced with challenging texts.

**Slides 7-8:** Discuss the various qualities that make a question text-dependent, such as strict adherence to the text for answers, not privileging background knowledge, and specificity regarding the particular text under study. Text-dependent questions are major forms of support for students. They point to the parts of the text that matter most for understanding its central ideas and for fulfilling the learning purpose the author of the text intended.

**Slide 9:** Share with participants the guidelines for constructing a strong interrelated set of questions about a text. Instruct them about focusing on key ideas, vocabulary, text structure, and other qualitative features of the text that might pose challenges for readers. It's also important to create coherent sequences of questions that move students through a text systematically.

**Begin the hands-on activity of Identifying Questions Worth Answering.**

**Slides 10-11:** *Distribute the participants' materials for Identifying Questions Worth Answering.* This includes directions for participants, the worksheet for Identifying Questions Worth Answering, and the excerpt from Linda R. Monk's *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* that you have printed on separate colored paper for ease of access.

**Slides 12-14:** *Provide directions to participants on how to complete the activity.* The instructions might seem a bit confusing at first, so it is worth taking the time needed to be sure participants are comfortable with the task demands. Review the instructions and evaluate a couple of the questions together before asking participants to work at their tables. This will ensure participants understand the coding system. If you sense that some groups are still not ready to work only with their tables, continue through the exercise as a full group.

The exercise works best if participants work through each category, one at a time (as opposed to trying to work through all four categories with one question before moving on to the next question). So, for example, apply the first category, could a student find evidence in the essay to answer each one of the questions? Then, go to the next category to determine if a reader would have to delve deeply to answer each question, and so on.

Working initially with the whole group, provide the following directions to participants:

1. Refer to your copies of *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*.
2. Review Identifying Questions Worth Answering and coding guides (the key to labeling the questions).
3. Reread the excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*. Stop for a moment to consider as a group what understanding Monk wants to communicate in this excerpt.
4. Evaluate a couple of the questions together applying the first category (i.e., Y/N: Could a student find evidence in the essay to answer this question?).

Then, have the participants work at their tables in pairs or small groups. Use your judgment about the confidence level of the participants to determine when to release them to pair work. Some participants do better continuing to work with a full table through the exercise. Here are the directions to give participants:

5. Continue to apply the first category to the remaining questions.

*TIP: To catch any error patterns early, stop the table work at intervals. Have participants compare their judgments and resolve any disagreements or confusion quickly.*

6. Evaluate a couple of the questions together, applying the second category (i.e., D: Does a reader have to dig deep to answer this question?).
7. Finish evaluating all of the remaining questions with that category, noting any questions or confusion to address during the debrief discussion with participants at your table.
8. Repeat the evaluation of questions, applying the next two categories (i.e., V: Does the question ask about a vocabulary word in the essay? and \*: Is this a question worth asking? If not, could you revise it to make it worth asking?).
9. During the debrief discussion, share your answers to the different columns with other table members and discuss any points of agreement or disagreement. Talk about which questions were the most difficult to analyze and why.
10. After you finish the exercise, talk with your full table again about what is the enduring understanding (the big idea) of the excerpt. Discuss whether any one of the questions is asking about that big idea, and note it at the bottom of the worksheet.

If time permits, or if you want to provide more practice, repeat the process with Identifying Questions Worth Answering: Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union.

### **Reflections: Thinking Back and Looking Forward (20 minutes)**

**Slide 15:** After participants complete the hands-on activity, bring the whole group together. Ask them to reflect on and then discuss what they have learned.

Ask participants to call out any questions they thought were particularly tricky and discuss them as a group. Point out the ways in which the high-quality, text-dependent questions *show* students where to return in the text to spend additional time with the most challenging and important parts of the text. Ask participants what they think about the value of the questions that proved to be text-dependent.

- Would the questions from Monk’s essay ask students to probe deeply into the text and read carefully to arrive at a solid answer?
- Would students have to return to the text and read it carefully to answer the question?
- How would that set of behaviors strengthen students’ reading comprehension?

Return to the PowerPoint Presentation (Slide 9) to review with participants some tips on how to build a good set of text-dependent questions:

- Investigate the qualitative features of the text.
- Identify the key ideas of the text.
- Start small to build confidence and check understanding.
- Target vocabulary as well as text and sentence structure.
- Tackle tough sections head-on.
- Create coherent sequences of text-dependent questions.
- Identify the standards that are being addressed.
- Create a culminating assessment by referring back to the core understanding or key idea.

**Slide 16:** In closing, ask them to reflect on and then discuss what they have learned. Ask them how they plan to use what they have learned.

Below are some questions for participants' reflections about their next steps:

- How has participating in this activity changed your thinking about the CCR Standards?
- How will you use the information and understanding you have acquired to improve your teaching practice and student learning?
- What additional training and tools would strengthen your ability to do so?

Once participants have a firm understanding of text-dependent questions, the last priority is to teach instructors how to build a writing prompt. This is a culminating assignment that builds on a set of previously identified high-quality, text-dependent questions and is designed to assess student understanding. Learning how to craft effective, high-quality writing prompts is addressed in Unit 4, *Creating High-Quality Writing Prompts*.