

ACHIEVING

NEXT

Using the Tests (You Think) You Hate
to Help the Students You Love

GENERATION

LITERACY

MAUREEN CONNOLLY VICKY GIOROUKAKIS

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We dedicate this book to all the teachers who commit themselves to being the best that they can be in order to make a difference in children's lives. They know that their tireless efforts are more important than teacher rating scores and that student development and understanding are more important than test scores.

ACHIEVING NEXT GENERATION LITERACY

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Introduction: It's Not About Teaching to the Test

Let's start with a question. Who do you think said the following?

We firmly believe that rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will not improve if teachers and students are distracted by the need to speed through impossibly broad course content and spend time on narrowly cast test preparation in an understandable but misguided effort to boost scores at the expense of mastery of critical knowledge, skills, and understandings.

Sounds like a parent or a teacher speaking out against test-prep culture, doesn't it? We thought so, too. Actually, these are the words of the College Board (2014c, p. 14), and they fuel our hope that the redesign of the SAT and the upcoming tests from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) will reflect the belief that test prep should not replace deeper learning.

The quote from the College Board is so good that we need to share the rest of it:

Further, we believe that the rates of college and career readiness and postsecondary success will improve only if our nation’s teachers are empowered to help the full range of students practice the kinds of rigorous, engaging daily work through which academic excellence can genuinely and reliably be attained. (College Board 2014c, p. 12)

That is what this book is about: teaching rich and challenging content in engaging ways that will equip students for postsecondary success while still preparing them to be successful on high-stakes exams—whether the SAT or ACT, achievement tests from PARCC and Smarter Balanced, or independent state assessments.

What Do Our Students Really Need?

We are living in an age in which a test score is assumed to reflect the quality of the instruction a student has received. But if we really consider what the indicators of a good education are, we would come up with many different answers representing a range of values and viewpoints. The conversation might go on for hours. Because this is a book focused on literacy, the question can be narrowed a bit: *What are the markers of an effective literacy education? What do our students really need in order to be literate? What are the qualities that a literate individual possesses?*

Here’s what we believe literate individuals are able to do:

1. **Demonstrate independence** with complex text by asking questions and being able to clarify information.
2. **Build strong content knowledge** through purposeful reading, writing, viewing, listening, and research.
3. **Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline** by shifting tone and selecting convincing evidence.
4. **Comprehend as well as critique** by analyzing the content and bias of sources.
5. **Value evidence** in arguments they hear, read, or develop.

6. Use technology strategically and capably by integrating sources and using tools to support their intentions.

7. Come to understand other perspectives and cultures through evaluation of their own perspectives and the perspectives of others.

If these qualities look familiar, it's because they are the seven "capacities of the literate individual" (CLI) outlined in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], 2015). Although the Common Core State Standards remain controversial for a number of reasons, we hope you will agree that the capacities described are ones that all students should develop. We believe that they are important life skills, critical to the exercise of the rights and responsibilities of global citizens and to the navigation of everyday life. Together, they form a portrait of what we are calling "next generation literacy."

The Common Core State Standards for ELA and content area literacy have been designed to ensure students will be college and career ready in terms of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language skills. Although the stated purpose of these standards is to prepare students to engage in the *processes* that are necessary in the college classroom or in the workforce, ironically, it's not the processes but the *products* of the Common Core (test scores) that tend to preoccupy educators, students, and parents. Throughout this text, the product we focus on is not test scores but students' acquisition and development of the capacities of the literate individual. To frame this in terms of the "backward design" model of lesson planning popularized by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2005), the CLI are the desired results, and the various high-stakes tests students must take provide evidence of those desired results.

Of course, we want to focus on the practical, so the next question we need to ask is this: *What can we do in the classroom*

to help students develop the capacities of the literate individual and achieve next generation literacy?

Teaching *Informed* by the Tests

One of the dangers of standards-based assessments is teachers thinking that they need to narrow their rich curricula and gear their instruction toward testing. Perhaps they incorporate fewer, if any, creative activities like role play and reader's theatre; perhaps they devote more time to drills, rote memorization, and practice exams. While these approaches can help students become more comfortable with high-stakes exams, it also sends the harmful message that exams are the end-all, be-all of education . . . that test scores are more important than the process of learning. By contrast, in the authentic type of classroom most teachers strive for, the focus is helping students acquire the knowledge and skills that will help them succeed on a much broader scale.

To write this book, we pored over sample test questions from PARCC, Smarter Balanced, the SAT and ACT, and representative state standards-based exams, and then we connected the content of these questions with the CLI. Our hope is that after reading this book, you will teach with these capacities as a primary concern and look to the tests your students will take as a resource for helping them develop the skills and knowledge they need.

Who We Are

Together, we have more than 25 years of teaching experience at the high school level. Both of us made the transition from teaching high school to teaching preservice and inservice secondary education teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels. We've collaborated several times as writers, always keeping our focus on providing practical advice to our colleagues in the field. Both of the books we have published together (Giouroukakis & Connolly,

2012, 2013) help the reader navigate the most efficient route to creating standards-based lessons that optimize student learning.

Maureen has a passion for service learning, so throughout this book, you will note many lessons that relate to social issues. Vicky is an expert at developing strategies to meet the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and struggling learners. She made sure that all the strategies we recommend throughout the text include clear and simple ways that they can be used to differentiate instruction. Whenever we choose information to include in the lessons we present to preservice and inservice teachers and whenever we write professional materials, we always ask ourselves, “Is this information clear and transferable into most classrooms?” Only when the answer is “yes” do we share it. The contents of this book meet that same standard of practicality.

As teacher educators, we are constantly trying to examine our own practice and reflect on what is working and what needs development. Backward design provides a framework for our planning, and we use the Common Core State Standards in general, and the CLI in particular, to guide our thinking about enduring understandings, skills, knowledge, and transfer. Although the Common Core State Standards have encouraged us to focus more on expository text and argument, we want to stress that novels, poetry, and short stories, along with narrative and creative writing, still hold an essential place in students’ literacy development.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for you! We are writing for middle and high school-level English language arts professionals (teachers, administrators, literacy coaches, staff developers, and teacher educators in the field of ELA) who recognize they need to prepare students for the next generation of exams but want to do so in a way that engages students in content learning and the development of next generation literacy and critical thinking skills.

What This Book Is For

In the pages ahead, we focus on the capacities of the literate individual, illustrate what the next generation of assessments that are designed to measure these CLI look like, and explore the knowledge and skills these tests require. Then we show you how to use the backward design model to create rich and challenging lessons that are aligned with the tests and incorporate the strategies you need to foster student success.

We want to be clear that this is *not* a test-prep book. We have no interest in drill-and-kill practices that narrow learning just to get students to pass an exam. This is a book about engaging, meaningful instructional methods and strategies for developing students' literacy skills and showing students how to transfer those skills to success on assessments. It is a resource for ELA professionals that provides answers to the questions so many of today's teachers have:

- *How can I prepare my students for standardized testing without sacrificing the creativity and passion for learning that are true to my values and to the ideals of the profession?*

- *How can I provide student-centered instructional methods and activities that are standards-based, engaging, motivating, thought-provoking, and meaningful—and that will also translate to high test scores?*

How This Book Is Organized

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, we make overt the ways that test development reflects literacy skills and influences instruction. Chapter 1 addresses the question of what it means to be literate in the 21st century and explores the literacy capacities that we want our students to have by the time they graduate from high school. Then we discuss how backward design can provide a roadmap for developing the CLI students need to

succeed on exams but, more important, also need to succeed in college, in their careers, and throughout their lives as involved, interested, and interesting human beings.

In Chapter 2, we analyze the next generation of exams and discuss both the mindful literacy-focused changes made to the SAT exam as well as the development of the newer, standards-based tests from the two national testing consortia, PARCC and Smarter Balanced. We also analyze various state tests. We compare similar components shared by these exams and highlight the unique qualities of each. We make purposeful connections among the components of the exams and specific CLI so that you can consider knowledge and skills that you want your students to develop.

In Part II, covering Chapters 3–8, we explore six of the seven CLI*, highlighting each one's component skills and modeling the process of creating lessons that will help students develop mastery. We present a sample lesson for each of the focus CLI, and every lesson has a strong focus on differentiation. The chapters in Part II present dozens of instructional strategies (42 in total), and in the book's Conclusion you will find a master chart that captures all the strategies associated with each capacity (see pp. 135–136).

Neither effective instruction nor this book is about teaching to the tests. Ultimately, the approach we advocate underscores that meaningful learning experiences are about enabling student growth and self-sufficiency. It's our hope you will consult this book for new ideas and practical strategies for fostering your students' development as independent, literate, well-educated individuals who are *also* well prepared to ace their high-stakes tests.

*Note that we do not include a chapter for the first capacity—*demonstrate independence with complex text by asking questions and clarifying information*, which encompasses the many ways that we want students to be independent in their reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. It's the development of the other six capacities that makes this kind of independence possible.

PART I

A Time of Change

The Next Generation of Literate Individuals and Assessments

In this section, we delve more deeply into the capacities of the literate individual (CLI), and we analyze sample test items from the next generation assessments (SAT, ACT, PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and various state tests). Our intention is to encourage you to consider what is most important for students to learn as they work to become literate individuals and how these new assessments reflect the skills and knowledge we want students to develop. The figures and analysis we present highlight both the similarities among the various tests and the connections between these tests and the CLI. As we state in the Introduction, we want to focus primarily on students' development as literate individuals and only secondarily on test preparation. If students have developed the CLI, they will be successful on exams.

This part of the book provides a lens through which to examine the lesson design process, learning experiences, and strategies covered in Part II. With a clear understanding of the CLI and the means by which tests strive to measure students' progress in the development of these capacities, you'll be prepared to make better-informed instructional decisions.

1

What Is a Literate Individual?

Being a literate person today means more than being able to read and write. In a world diverse with cultures, print texts, media, and technologies, a literate person needs to possess certain specific capabilities.

Let's think about the daily literacy-related practices of a typical adolescent (we'll call him Paul).

Paul wakes up to the sound of his smartphone's alarm. He picks it up and checks the time. Then he reads and responds to any e-mails and text messages that came in overnight. A game or two on his screen may tempt him to stay on his phone a bit longer. Paul goes on Facebook, scrolls through his friends' statuses, "liking" and commenting, and posting a status of his own. Instagram is next, where he looks at his friends' pictures, comments, and maybe posts a picture or two saved on his phone. Then Paul fires up his tablet, drops in on a few different websites, and scans the day's headlines to catch up on the news and last night's scores.

Both in school and while doing his homework, Paul uses digital tools and devices to complete assignments. He navigates the Internet to locate reliable websites for information and reads a diverse variety of online texts—some that he finds or chooses himself, and others that are provided or curated by his teachers. As his teachers require, Paul synthesizes the information he finds, identifying text-based evidence that he'll go on to cite,

and he selects the product format best suited for his goals (e.g., a multimedia presentation, a short digital movie, a wiki, role play, a discussion, an essay). He shares his work with an audience of diverse peers, some of whom are just learning English, some of whom come from cultural backgrounds very different from his own, some of whom seem to learn much more easily than he does, and some of whom are pursuing goals set out for them in individual education plans. Paul and his classmates give feedback on one another's work and share their takes on classroom content in all kinds of learning arrangements—from partner work to small groups to the whole class. His after-school circle is similarly diverse—all kinds of kids meeting up in person or online to explore and pursue expertise in sports, music, gaming, and other areas of interest. Paul's life is all about taking in information, reflecting on it, sharing it, connecting with others, and communicating about what he's seen, read, thought about, experienced, and felt.

How does this portrait connect with what it means to be a student who meets rigorous academic standards and is college and career ready? An expanded overview of the seven capacities of the literate individual (CLI), paraphrased from their presentation in the Common Core State Standards (CCSSI, 2015), will shed some light on how Paul exhibits next generation literacy.

1. Literate individuals demonstrate independence with text. They can, independently, with little guidance from teachers and peers, comprehend varied, complex print and digital texts, communicate and build on others' ideas, and understand and apply academic and discipline-specific vocabulary and conventions of English. They know how to use strategies and employ them when necessary to comprehend texts and apply literacy knowledge and skills.

2. Literate individuals build strong content knowledge. They acquire and share knowledge of subject matter through

reading, writing, and speaking as well as research and study. They read and understand discipline-specific texts and become experts in the content.

3. Literate individuals respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline. They set and adjust their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline. They understand how words affect meaning in writing and in speech, depending on the audience and the purpose, and how different disciplines call for providing different types of evidence.

4. Literate individuals comprehend as well as critique. They understand and can explain what writers, speakers, and visual and mixed media creators are saying through their texts, but they also know how to analyze and examine these texts critically. They question an author's assumptions and biases and evaluate the veracity and logical reasoning of the claims.

5. Literate individuals value evidence. They can cite evidence to support their interpretation of text, both verbally and in writing. They also communicate their reasoning effectively and know how to evaluate the reasoning and arguments of others.

6. Literate individuals use technology and digital media strategically and capably. They employ technology thoughtfully and effectively and can determine which media are best suited for their communication goals. They also synthesize information found through various media and technologies.

7. Literate individuals come to understand other perspectives and cultures. They encounter perspectives and ways of life that are different from their own through reading, writing, and listening, and they are able to work and communicate effectively with peers of diverse backgrounds. Through reading multicultural literature, they have new experiences that expand their cultural understanding and sensitivity.

What can teachers do to help their students acquire, develop, and refine the capacities of the literate individual? We can keep

these CLI at the forefront of our thinking during planning. Backward design can help with this. Read on!

Using Backward Design as a Planning Framework

When it comes to lesson planning, many teachers, especially the preservice teachers whom we teach in college, tend to focus a lot on their *inputs*—what they and the students will *do* and *say* during a lesson. They focus a lot less on the *outcomes* they want to see as a result of students' learning experiences. Backward design is a curricular design approach that puts outcomes, otherwise known as the lesson goals, at the forefront, then has the teacher work “backward” to plan the learning experiences that will help students achieve these goals. In the end, backward design provides a roadmap teachers can use to guide students to the intended destination—mastery of particular skills, objectives, or, in our case, CLI. It calls for teachers to consider the “big ideas” in the content they are delivering and then frame them around “essential questions.”

First introduced by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in 1998 and then revised and expanded in 2005, backward design consists of three stages:

- **Stage 1: Identify desired results.** Teachers decide on the essential understandings, knowledge, and skills that they want their students to gain as a result of the curriculum. For our purposes, the desired results are one or more of the CLI.

- **Stage 2: Determine acceptable evidence.** Next, teachers create or choose formal and informal assessments that will generate evidence of students' developing knowledge and understanding. In this stage, the question is “How will students show me they are moving toward mastery of the CLI? How will I ask them to reflect upon and assess their learning?” We can use a variety of measurement instruments—everything from

high-stakes tests to traditional unit-ending exams to authentic, performance-based tasks and assignments—to identify and document students’ literacy development.

• **Stage 3: Plan learning experiences and instruction.** Finally, teachers plan and design learning experiences and teaching that will enable students to achieve the desired results. In Stage 3, the focus turns more explicitly to inputs: “What activities, instruction, sources, and methods will promote my students’ understanding, interest, and excellence in the identified capacity?”

Figure 1.1 shows a backward design approach to developing the capacities of the literate individual.

FIGURE 1.1 The Backward Design Approach Using the Capacities of the Literate Individual	
Key Design Questions	
Stage 1. What are the desired results?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Which capacities of the literate individual does the unit address? (b) What enduring understandings are desired? (c) What key knowledge and skills will students acquire as a result of this unit?
Stage 2. What is the evidence of understanding?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Through what performance-based task will students demonstrate achievement of the desired results? (b) Through what other evidence will students demonstrate achievement of the desired results? (c) How will students reflect upon and assess their literacy development?
Stage 3. What learning experiences and instruction will enable students to achieve the desired results?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) What learning experiences and teaching will promote student understanding, interest, and excellence? (b) What sources will be used to promote student understanding, interest, and excellence? (c) What teaching methods will be employed to promote understanding, interest, and excellence?

Adapted from Wiggins & McTighe, 2005.

Backward design mirrors what test developers like PARCC and Smarter Balanced do. These organizations think about what students who are on the path to college and career readiness ought to be able to do (identify desired results, or outcomes), and they design measures to assess where students are in their development (determine acceptable evidence). Smarter Balanced (n.d.) explains this clearly:

The Smarter Balanced assessment system will cover the full range of college- and career-ready knowledge and skills in the Common Core State Standards. To do this, each test item is associated with assessment targets and overall content claims. Content claims are major categories for looking at student performance. The assessment targets were developed to ensure item writers and reviewers address the standards, learning progressions, and the range of thinking possible. (para. 13)

The next generation of assessments is being developed based on clear standards and expectations known to all stakeholders:

The critical nature of content alignment became clear to all educators as a result of the *Debra P. vs. Turlington* case in 1981, in which it was ruled that the content of a test must be aligned to curriculum/instruction to be fair. This is intended to be accomplished by being aligned to the same content standards, thereby assuring that students have had the opportunity to learn the tested material. (Smarter Balanced, 2012, p. 8)

In the current testing climate, some of the means of measuring learning outcomes may be out of teachers' hands, but the inputs are still up to us. If we keep the literacy competencies in mind as we design our instruction, we will guide students' skill development and content knowledge toward college and career readiness, ensuring their success on the assessments designed to measure just that.

PART II

In the Classroom

Developing the Capacities of the Literate Individual

In this part of the book, we explore ways to help students develop the capacities of the literate individual (CLI). The next six chapters address six of the seven capacities—all of them save independence with complex text, a capacity that emerges from the development of the other six.

Each chapter focuses on a specific CLI and follows a standard pattern designed to model the process of creating test-informed ELA lessons to build next generation literacy:

1. We deconstruct the CLI by highlighting two or three descriptors that isolate its component skills. In other words, we look closely at what students must be able to do in order to *build strong content knowledge, comprehend as well as critique, value evidence*, and so on.

2. We share a sample assessment item from or directly modeled on a state test or the SAT, ACT, PARCC, or Smarter Balanced exam and tease out the connections between the assessment task and the component skills of the CLI.

3. We describe a lesson designed to help students build the CLI's component skills, focusing on effective instructional

strategies and highlighting how each of these strategies can be deployed to support differentiation and help learners with varied needs engage with lesson content and build literacy.

If this three-part construct sounds familiar, it should! It is backward design. The targeted CLI is *Stage 1: Desired Result*, the test item functions as *Stage 2: Evidence*, and the lesson represents *Stage 3: Instructional Procedures*. Maybe you remember the prompts in Figure 1.1, but in case you do not (and to save you from flipping back), here's a reminder of the key questions that we need to ask ourselves for these stages:

- Stage 1: What are the desired results?
- Stage 2: What is the evidence of understanding?
- Stage 3: What learning experiences and instruction will enable students to achieve the desired results?

The CLI and test questions help us know where we're headed, but it is up to us to decide how best to get there. For each CLI, we ask ourselves, "What engaging means can we use to develop students' knowledge and understanding?"

Over Part II's chapters and sample lessons, we share 42 instructional strategies for developing next generation literacy. Although these strategies are presented in connection with a particular capacity, there is a lot of functional overlap; several strategies are effective in fostering more than one CLI. (See the Conclusion for an overview of which strategies can be effectively used to promote which CLI.) In short, we present these teaching strategies as a set of tools that you and your students can use to develop knowledge and skills.

Please note that each of the lesson examples in Part II has a strong focus on differentiation. In education classes, the term *differentiation* is tossed around like a Hacky Sack on the quad. Students and teachers alike know the importance of being able to differentiate content, process, and product. For example, in the sample lesson in Chapter 3, which involves creating an

environmental campaign (see pp. 46–47), differentiation of content and process is evident in the choice of topic students have within the frame of environmentalism and the varied sources they're asked to consult (written text, online texts, video of spoken presentations, classmates during discussion). Differentiation of product comes from the various ways students are asked to demonstrate their learning: through speaking in a debate or evaluating the debaters, by writing a formal piece of argumentation (a proposal), and by developing a more creative persuasive piece (a flyer).

In each CLI-focused chapter, we include reflection questions for all three stages of backward design. If you are currently in the classroom, you can use these questions to capitalize on what is going well and to shine a light on areas where you want to grow. If you are a preservice teacher, you might apply these questions to classroom observations or use them as a basis for reflecting on your own K–12 experiences.

Finally, we want to stress that the sample lesson scenarios we provide are just that—*samples*. Each is a demonstration of how strategies may be combined in a particular learning experience, but they are not meant to dictate how to teach *your* students. You may want to address more than one capacity in a lesson or combine strategies presented in different lessons. Our greatest intent is to remind you that teaching doesn't have to be about teaching to the test, and that creative, meaningful teaching and learning lead naturally to students' success on exams and, more important, success in life.

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Maureen believes that at the core of her profession is the need to develop purposeful learning that opens students' eyes to the potential for positive change in themselves and in their local, national, and global communities. She resides in New Jersey with her wonderful husband and two happy, smart, and kind children. Maureen can be reached at connollm@tcnj.edu.



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