Mrs. Lewis’s high school English language arts class has 12 students with a wide range of ability levels: two students use wheelchairs and have limited mobility in their arms, one student has low vision, five students are nonverbal, four have autism spectrum disorder, three students use English as their second language, and all have moderate or severe intellectual disability. Mrs. Lewis started the year with one goal in mind: to share her love of literature and English language arts by exposing the students to a variety of genres, while teaching to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

In Mrs. Lewis’s classroom, literary terms and definitions cover the walls with items such as character, setting, theme, and plot—all with picture supports. The students all have an adapted text of *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck (1947) on their desks, and follow along by text pointing. The student with low vision has an enlarged adapted text set on a slant board, and the nonverbal students have a Big Mack switch to read the repeated story line.

Mrs. Lewis reviews the events that have happened in *The Pearl* up to this point. She uses time delay and example/nonexample training to teach a combination of high-frequency sight words and grade-level vocabulary prior to starting the next chapter. Mr. Davis, the paraprofessional, reads the text projected on the interactive whiteboard aloud to the students. Unlike many adapted texts, there are no picture symbols above the words, but there is a picture or two on each page of text illustrating what is happening in the story. As Mr. Davis reads the text aloud and the students text point in their adapted books, Mrs. Lewis acts out a scene where Kino deftly opens the oyster shell to reveal an incandescent pearl. The students are mesmerized as Mrs. Lewis walks around showing them the beautiful pearl in the oyster shell, and the students get to feel the rough oyster shell and the smooth pearl. Seeing, touching, and interacting with the shell and the pearl is a new experience for many of the students.

Mrs. Lewis projects several comprehension questions on the whiteboard; some are literal and some are inferential. She checks students’ understanding by walking from student to student, displaying response options on an iPad. One student selects an incorrect answer, and she uses a least-intrusive prompting script to guide him to the correct answer. For inferential questions that cannot be found directly in the text, Mrs. Lewis uses a think-aloud strategy to help students come up with the answer. She closes the lesson by reading an excerpt from the original text so students have an opportunity to hear the author’s tone and the rich language. At the end of the lesson, Mrs. Lewis’s students show an impressive level of understanding, thanks to the supports and instructional strategies she has used to keep them actively engaged in the story-based lesson (which is aligned to both the content and the CCSS).
The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, http://www.corestandards.org) represent a shared set of content standards for all students that provide a framework for instruction and assessment. The target for all students as they participate within the CCSS is college and career readiness. For some students this target may mean that they are prepared to attend college; for others it will mean that they are prepared to enter the workforce. Whichever path is chosen, literacy—broadly defined as the ability to read, write, and communicate (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003)—is crucial. Mrs. Lewis knows that literacy is essential for her students; it impacts almost every aspect of their lives in successful 21st-century classrooms (Murphy, 2001) as well as in adult life beyond the school years. She also knows that the CCSS represent what she is to teach in English language arts (ELA), although they provide no guidance on how to teach the content, especially for students with severe disabilities.

**The target for all students as they participate within the CCSS is college and career readiness.**

Currently 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four territories have adopted the CCSS (see http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states for the full list). Individual states are permitted to write alternate standards for those students who require an alternate assessment based upon alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS). These alternate standards must be linked to the CCSS for all students who are exempt from standardized state tests and represent the state’s judgment of the highest expectations possible for this population of students (see Colorado Department of Education, 2011, for an example). The CCSS also serve as the foundation for a newly developed national AA-AAS (see http://www.k12center.org/publications/alternative.html); two consortia,
Dynamic Learning Maps and The National Center and State Collaborative, have been commissioned to develop new AA-AAS for teachers like Mrs. Lewis to use with their students during the 2014–2015 school year.

Structure of the CCSS

The CCSS in ELA are organized into two sections (one containing the standards for K–5 and one for Grades 6–12) intended to guide learning for all students, including those with disabilities. The K–5 section has four strands: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language; the Grades 6–12 section includes these strands plus three additional strands: science, history/social studies, and technical subjects. The ELA strands also include a set of college and career readiness anchor standards, which are specific to each strand and are identical throughout the grades. The purpose of the anchor standards is to provide a framework intended to ensure college and career readiness. Each of the ELA anchor standard strands contain subgroups:

- Reading and informational text: key ideas and details, craft and structure, integration of knowledge and ideas, and range of reading and level of text complexity.
- Writing: text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing.
- Speaking and listening: comprehension and collaboration and presentation of knowledge and ideas.
- Language: conventions of standard English, knowledge of language, and vocabulary acquisition and use.

Teachers at all levels, including teachers working with students with disabilities and with students eligible for AA-AAS, need to be aware that the standards for each grade level provide an indication of the content that is expected to come before and after. This range of standards allows teachers like Mrs. Lewis who work with students who have a range of needs to ensure alignment and progression within the new CCSS.

As part of our previous work in the area of aligning academic content for students with severe disabilities with academic standards (Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, & Baker, 2006; Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007; Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozzine, 2006; Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013; Saunders, Bethune, Spooner, & Browder, 2013), we developed a six-step approach that is effective for ELA instruction:

1. Select a text.
2. Target the CCSS.
3. Adapt text.
4. Develop the lesson template.
5. Incorporate evidence- and research-based practices.
6. Include a writing component.

Teachers have found this approach to developing lessons aligned to the CCSS in ELA helpful, particularly when they have access to practical ideas and clear procedures at each of these stages.

Teaching the CCSS in ELA

Step 1: Select a Text

Literary and informational texts are two types of text teachers can use that are focused on the CCSS, so both should be targeted for all students within a school year. Using both types of text allows students like those in Mrs. Lewis’s class to be exposed to a variety of literature, different genres, and even interdisciplinary texts, such as in science and social studies. Using both types of text can be overwhelming, because the teacher or the students may have limited knowledge of grade-level literature, but collaborating with grade-level teams, general education teachers, and literacy facilitators can make this step much easier.

Ideally, selected texts should target the middle of a grade band when teaching multiple grade levels or when instructing students with severe disabilities. For example, when selecting text for elementary school in a classroom of third through fifth graders, target the fourth-grade suggested reading selections. Consideration of gender and diversity also is important to ensure the texts are appealing to both male and female students and to provide an opportunity for students to learn about diverse cultures in the classroom.

General education teachers and literary facilitators are essential to this step because they can recommend grade-level material, provide insight on the concepts covered within a text, and offer guidance on text complexity and ease of reading. To promote inclusive opportunities, special education teachers can adapt the same literature being used in students’ general education classes. Adapting the same literature and preteaching comprehension helps students gain skills for participating in the general education ELA teacher’s lessons.

It is important to consider text complexity when mapping out texts for the year. Teachers like Mrs. Lewis might start with a simple, easy read, such as a short story or an easy-read chapter book covering very literal, identifiable content and themes. For example, for her middle school students Mrs. Lewis might begin with the graphic novel *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney (2007), a popular, easy read, and progress towards more complex themes like those found in *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park (2001), which addresses Korean culture and homelessness. Using an easy-to-hard progression captures students’ interests and helps them acquainted with story-based lessons, adapted text, word study, and simple comprehension. As teachers at all levels... need to be aware that the standards for each grade level provide an indication of the content that is expected to come before and after.
the school year progresses and students become familiar with literary lessons aligned to the CCSS, progressing to other genre types or more complex concepts and themes is easier to accomplish.

Another tip for educators teaching the CCSS in ELA to students with severe disabilities is to consider resources and supports already available, such as YouTube, TeacherTube, or BrainPop videos to support further explanation of the text or concepts covered. Perhaps a movie already has been made based on the book; there are also web sites that offer interactive activities to supplement ELA lessons, and teachers can download images to support the text. No matter the approach, using appropriate literature with as many supports as possible is the key to supporting students with severe disabilities in their acquisition of ELA skills and knowledge.

**Step 2: Target the CCSS**
The next step is to target the CCSS for the unit. First, teachers should check to see if their state has already prioritized CCSS or alternative standards for the CCSS. There are many commonalities across the CCSS from literary to informational texts, as well as across grade bands, so some CCSS will be addressed over multiple units. Teachers like Mrs. Lewis can use word studies that span across units and even across literary and informational texts. For example, the third-grade standards in literature (RL) and informational text (RI) share a common theme:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.4 Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, pp. 12 and 14)

CCSS comprehension goals, similarly, cross strands. Here is an example from the seventh-grade standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, pp. 36 and 39)

Because of the commonalities and repetition across grade bands, the complexity of selected texts, the vocabulary, and the concepts or themes should build and vary over the school year. Mrs. Lewis can use the CCSS to help write comprehension questions and to plan additional skill-building activities for her lessons. She may even want to develop a table to organize the text, targeted CCSS, and specific objectives when planning. Table 1 illustrates how this can be accomplished with elementary, middle, and high school standards.

Although phonics and fluency are only addressed in elementary CCSS, these foundational literacy skills are essential for building independent reading skills. Students with severe disabilities need to work on these foundational skills throughout their school career, or as specified in their individualized education program. Opportunities for practicing phonics and fluency should be embedded into each lesson.

**Step 3: Adapt Text**
This step can be the most time consuming of all, but with careful planning and external resources it can be done quite efficiently. When adapting text for students, first read the original text; it is essential to understand the text as a whole, from beginning to end, in order to teach it well. Reading the original text provides the opportunity to highlight excerpts to read to the class while implementing the unit, identify difficult concepts that may need to be taught before presenting the text, and select grade-level vocabulary and sight words for the word study. The next step is to shorten the text. One rule of thumb to use when doing this is “no more different than necessary!” If students can respond to a read-aloud of the original text, no adaptations need to be made. There are a number of ways to go about shortening the text, such as summarizing the chapters, finding an abridged version on the Internet, collaborating with an ELA general education teacher, working in teams and dividing chapters to summarize, or recruiting general education students who have read the book and are willing to summarize. Some schools may even have a reading competition team, such as Battle of the Books (see http://www.battleofthebooks.org/), and participating students might be willing to adapt several grade-level books as a group activity. One very important consideration is to ensure that literary elements—such as a mix of sentence structures, grade-level vocabulary words, figures of speech, context clues, author’s tone, author’s purpose (i.e., to inform, to persuade, to entertain), theme, and plot—are preserved in the adaptation. Mrs. Lewis always reads excerpts from the original text to her students, ensuring that they gain some familiarity with the author’s tone and rich language—another tip for teachers using adapted texts.

The Lexile Framework for Reading (http://www.lexile.com/) provides a numerical value that measures text complexity, and Lexile measures for many books can be found on the Internet (e.g., using the search terms “Lexile measure Steinbeck Pearl”). To get a Lexile score for adapted texts, users must input the adapted text into the Lexile Analyzer; the Lexile Analyzer requires registration and is free to use. Because of length limits, this may need to be done chapter by chapter for each adapted text. The recommended Lexile levels for each grade band (i.e., elementary beginning of school year 100–300, second half of school year 300–600; middle school beginning of school year 140–445,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Band</th>
<th>CCSS Code and Standard</th>
<th>Targeted Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades 3–5</td>
<td>3.RL.1 Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.</td>
<td>Answer literal recall questions (e.g., who, what, where, when)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.RL.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.</td>
<td>Determine the theme of story or poem (provide common themes)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.RL.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</td>
<td>Refer to detail in text to explain what text says</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.RL.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</td>
<td>Identify and/or compare characters, settings, or events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.RL.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.RF.4 Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension. b. Read on-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings.</td>
<td>Identify grade-level words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.RF.3 Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words. a. Use combined knowledge of all letter-sound correspondences, syllabication patterns, and morphology (e.g., roots and affixes) to read accurately unfamiliar multisyllabic words in context and out of context.</td>
<td>Use context clues for multiple meaning words</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 4 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies. a. Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of the word or phrase.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies. a. Use context (e.g., definitions, examples, or restatements in text) as a clue to the meaning of the word or phrase.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 6–8</td>
<td>6.RL.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.</td>
<td>Summarize a text (use graphic organizer to support)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6.RL.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</td>
<td>Make inferences about characters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.RL.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.</td>
<td>Analyze development of theme (use graphic organizer to support)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.RL.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.</td>
<td>Make inferences using textual evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.RL.1 Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.RL.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 6 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies. a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of the word or phrase.</td>
<td>Use context clues to determine meaning of grade level words and multiple meaning words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 7 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies. a. Use context (e.g., the overall meaning of a sentence or paragraph; a word’s position or function in a sentence) as a clue to the meaning of the word or phrase.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

continues
second half of school year 445–810; high school beginning of school year 445–810, second half of school year 565–910) vary widely, but are intended to provide guidelines for gradually increasing difficulty throughout the school year. When adapting texts, teachers can increase the Lexile level by varying sentence structure, sentence length, and difficulty of vocabulary. Before adapting texts, check the Lexile level; the book might already fall within the recommended range and may only need to be read aloud with opportunities for independent reading. Hudson and colleagues (2013) offered several suggestions for adapting text, including making text augmentations, using predictable text structure, and creating response options.

The word study standards of the CCSS go far beyond traditional high-frequency sight words and functional vocabulary. Although these are important, students with severe disabilities have demonstrated that they can learn grade-level vocabulary as well (Jameson, McDonnell, Polychronis, & Riesen, 2008). When developing adapted text (see Figure 1), consider including a combination of high-frequency sight words, words that can do double duty as functional sight words, and grade-level vocabulary words. Also, consider including multiple-meaning words and words whose meaning can be determined through context clues, to enhance the word study component of the lesson. One suggestion for context clues is to add a sentence either before or after the unfamiliar vocabulary word which defines or explains the meaning. In Figure 1, which presents an original sample of an adapted text for middle school students, the sentence after the word ecstatic (i.e., “I was so happy to see my friend had returned.”) helps the student define an unknown word. This also helps students learn to look in nearby sentences for clues to understand words and phrases that they may not know.

Several Common Core grade-level vocabulary lists—including recommended lists for mathematics, science, and social studies for all grades levels—can be found on the Internet. These can be used when adapting text to ensure that grade-level vocabulary words are included in the text. Teachers should consider incorporating a word wall in their classroom arrangement, so vocabulary can be added and reviewed throughout the school year.

**Step 4: Develop the Lesson Template**

Once the book has been adapted, lesson development is quite simple, and the lesson format can be used across chapters of a book by simply changing the vocabulary words and comprehension questions, as well as addressing different targeted CCSS. This provides multiple opportunities for students to practice the same skills across time but within different contexts, which prevents memorization and builds generalization.

The word study standards of the CCSS go far beyond traditional high-frequency sight words and functional vocabulary.

Keeping the same lesson structure across story-based lessons also helps students know what to expect and how to respond, maximizing instructional time. For example, Mrs. Lewis always begins her lessons by having students find the title and author, introduces or reviews characters and setting (if known already), and introduces the repeated story line for the text or chapter. Next, she teaches the vocabulary using instructional strategies such as constant time delay (see box, “What Is the Constant Time Delay Strategy?”), which has been found to be an evidence-based practice for teaching students with severe disabilities (Browder,
Ahgrim-Delzell, Spooner, Mims, & Baker, 2009). Examples and nonexamples are another potential way to teach story elements like character and setting or grade-level vocabulary terms. After doing introductory story elements and vocabulary, Mrs. Lewis’s students read the adapted text aloud. In order for students to be engaged, teachers can vary the tone when reading, act out the scene when feasible, have students participate by finding and reading key vocabulary terms, and pause to read the repeated story line as a class. Frequent, active participation is critical to engagement in shared story reading. Finally, end by reading an excerpt from the original text. When teachers use this format, students gain a rich literary experience.

Although it is tempting to cover a new chapter every day, repeated reading across days may improve comprehension and provide students with severe disabilities more time to practice skills (Mims, Hudson, & Browder, 2012). A typical lesson template, incorporating the constant time delay strategy for vocabulary instruction, would be:

- On Day 1, read and focus on beginning story elements, introducing vocabulary at a zero-second delay round, and asking literal comprehension questions.
- On Day 2, read and focus on vocabulary instruction and ask them to find and read the repeated story line as a class. Students may need additional time to practice the vocabulary introduced the previous day.
- On Day 3, read and focus on the next story element. Provide students with additional opportunities to practice the vocabulary terms they have learned.

Once I had a pet owl. A man in Fairfax had to cut down a tree and this baby owl was in it. The owl was nothing but a ball of feathers, and I named him Rotate and kept him about three years. He was a great horned owl and he was an affectionate little guy. I would take him to see my friends and he would sit snuggly on my shoulder. He never scratched me. He never bit me. He was always loyal and respectful towards me.

My mother did not want me to take the owl into the house. If she caught me with the owl in the house, she would say, “You and that owl are on thin ice!” I knew she really liked him and considered him part of our family.

One day Rotate scratched my sister across the hand when she took a hamburger away from him. My mother said, “That owl’s got to go.” I started to sob because I was so upset but my mother said it was going to be alright. She said that owls needed to be in the wild. So I took him down to the mountain and turned him loose about three miles away from my grandmother’s house. When I got home the old owl was sitting up in the tree waiting for me. I was ecstatic. I was so happy to see my friend had returned.

Vocabulary and Text High Frequency Words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High frequency words</th>
<th>Vocabulary words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>owl</td>
<td>Multi-meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scratch</td>
<td>Figure of Speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tree</td>
<td>Grade Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>house</td>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pet</td>
<td>Context Clues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 10: Sometimes we use figures of speech. A figure of speech is a phrase used to create an effect but does not literally mean what it says. Listen to this passage: “You and that owl are on thin ice”?

What does “on thin ice” mean?

- They were standing on this ice.
- They were in trouble.
- They ate shaved ice.
What Is the Constant Time Delay Strategy?
Using constant time delay to teach vocabulary (Browder et al., 2009), the teacher begins by asking the student to find the word in an array (or by reading the word aloud, if verbal) and simultaneously (no delay/zero-second delay round) showing the correct answer. This is repeated for each new vocabulary word. Over teaching trials, the prompt is faded using small increments of time (e.g., 4-second delay round) so that the student anticipates the correct response. Constant time delay also can be used during general education lessons to teach key vocabulary (Jameson et al., 2008). For example, a peer tutor might give the student a definition and ask the student to find the word in an array.

Story-based lessons can be used effectively with students with the most severe disabilities (Mims, Browder, Baker, Lee, & Spooner, 2009). See box, “Implementing Story-Based Lessons,” for suggestions for working with this group.

Step 5: Incorporate Evidence-Based and Research-Based Practices

Systematic Instruction. To ensure high-quality instruction, the lesson should include evidence-based or research-based practices that have been found to be effective with students with severe disabilities. The two primary strategies that have been documented in the research on literacy for students with severe disabilities are constant time delay to teach vocabulary (Browder et al., 2009) and the system of least intrusive prompts to teach students to locate the correct answer when the text is read aloud (Hudson, Browder, & Jimenez, in press; Mims et al., 2012). In the system of least intrusive prompts strategy (see Figure 2), the teacher reads a portion of the text aloud (e.g., one paragraph or page) and asks a comprehension question. If the student does not answer correctly, the teacher rereads three sentences that contain the answer. If still not correct, the teacher rereads the sentence with the answer. If the student still needs more help, the teacher reads the sentence and points to the answer on a response board (or says the answer). Finally, the teacher guides the student to point to the answer. Peers also can learn to read the adapted text aloud and provide this prompting support (Hudson et al., in press).

Graphic Organizers. Graphic organizers are a good method for supporting comprehension in students with severe disabilities (Schenning, Knight, & Spooner, 2013; see Figure 3). Graphic organizers can be created to help students summarize a story by what happens first, next, and last; compare and contrast two articles about the same topic; select and organize the main idea, theme, or conclusion and supporting details; sort response options with examples from the text to determine the author’s purpose; create a KWHL chart (what I know, what I want to know, how I will find out; what I learned); and identify the problem and solutions.

Add Technology. Technology should be used in the classroom to increase engagement, understanding, communication, and independence during story-based lessons. There are technology tools for supplementing instruction (e.g., showing the movie after reading a book), as a means to deliver instruction (e.g., a computer program or an interactive whiteboard), and for augmenting instruction (e.g., using a tablet application for student responding). Assistive technology—whether using low-tech picture symbols, or high-tech devices such as a switch, voice output device, or dynamic communication device—is especially important for students with limited verbal communication, and can help them more effectively express themselves and their knowledge. Technology also can be used to increase independence during a story-based lesson. For example, the Quizlet online flashcard system and Quizlet app (http://quizlet.com/) allow users to select a word, hear it spoken,
Implementing Story-Based Lessons for Students With Severe Disabilities

- **Select literal texts** that discuss topics familiar to students (make sure the topics are age-appropriate).
- **Significantly shorten text.** Consider students’ attention span. Begin with very short reading sessions and gradually increase the duration over time.
- **Keep vocabulary simple,** focusing on one or two target words. Use objects to represent key vocabulary.
- **Change names of characters** to names that are familiar to students.
- **Focus on the fundamental CCSS component.** What is essential for the student to understand? (For example, for the CCSS expectation “Determine the main idea of a text,” the expectation is that the student will be able to identify the topic from the repeated story line using pictures/objects; for the CCSS expectation “Determine character traits,” the student should be able to identify the main character.)
- **Intersperse comprehension questions** (ask a comprehension question immediately after reading the sentence with the answer).
- **Use objects and surprise elements** to enhance comprehension and maintain interest. Surprise elements are things that involve multiple senses and increase engagement (e.g., misting water in the air while reading about a rainy day).
- **Ask questions** that do not have a “correct” answer (e.g., Did you like the story? Who was your favorite character?).
- **Reduce response options** to two: one correct and one far-off distracter, if needed. Objects can be used in place of photographs or picture symbols for response options.
- **Frequently praise** or reinforce attending and responding.
- **Use assistive technology.**
- **Consider student’s response mode.** Is it the most efficient manner for the student to answer? Is it easier or more efficient for students to respond via eye gazing or head nodding than raising hands and verbalizing?
- **Look for small achievements** (e.g., more consistent responding, attending for longer periods, signs of enjoyment/engagement, selecting a correct response).
- **Adapt the principle of least dangerous assumption** (Donnellan 1984) and presume competence. Your students just might surprise you with consistent, effective instructional practices!

Step 6: Include a Writing Component

Reading and writing are complementary activities and should be taught concurrently and interrelated when possible. It is important for teachers like Mrs. Lewis to remember that writing is not a one-size-fits-all approach and may require different activities from student to student. Whether writing means stamping a name or letters, scribbling, writing letters, copying from a model, or using inventive versus conventional spelling, the goal is for all students to start writing and be encouraged in this task. There are several ways to incorporate writing into lessons. For example, when working with students who can copy from a model, Mrs. Lewis may choose to put a sentence on the board with incorrect grammar and have students correct the sentence in a journal as a warm-up activity; at the same time, other students in her class are practicing writing or typing the new vocabulary words for a lesson.

The process of writing as presented in the CCSS focuses on narrative and descriptive writing in elementary, informative writing in middle school, and persuasive writing in high school. Table 2 provides a sample of extension writing activities that special educators developed in ELA lessons that align to the CCSS. There are several alternatives for students like Mrs. Lewis’s who cannot write entire paragraphs on their own. Although some students may be able to use a word wall and/or high-frequency sight word list to write sentences or a paragraph, other students may need much more support. Some may need to use sentence starters or structured sentences with fill-in blanks, or to dictate ideas to a teacher or paraprofessional. Several writing software programs are available to help support students with severe disabilities, such as SymWriter (http://www.widgit.com/products/symwriter/index.htm, previously Writing with...
Figure 2. Least Intrusive Prompting Strategy

1. Ask comprehension question and wait.
2. Prompt 1: Reread a portion of the text that contains the answer.
3. Prompt 2: Reread the sentence with the answer.
4. Prompt 3: Reread the sentence and point to/say the correct answer (model).
5. Prompt 4: Guide student to touch correct answer.

Figure 3. Sample Graphic Organizers to Support Comprehension

- **Identifying Author’s Purpose**
  - Introduce (Describes who/what)
  - Persuade (Present facts)
  - Infuse (Appeals to feelings)

- **Build Essential Understanding: Selecting Topic and Supporting Details**
  - Topic
  - Supporting detail 1
  - Supporting detail 2

- **Problem and Solution**
  - Problem: Dogs chew on shoes, cats chew curtains.
  - Solution: Get your pet’s nails trimmed, give your pets healthy treats.

**Final Thoughts**

The CCSS is a set of content standards that target readiness for college and career participation for all students, including those with severe disabilities, and represents a shared framework for instruction and assessment in two primary areas: English language arts and mathematics. In both cases, the CCSS provides guidance on what to teach, but not on how this content is to be taught.

In an effort to offer assistance to teachers like Mrs. Lewis who work with students with severe disabilities in understanding the CCSS in ELA, we have offered suggestions about how to structure ELA lessons aligned to the CCSS. Our six-step approach has been successfully used by teachers in developing lessons aligned to the CCSS standards. The goal of the alignment is to enhance the long-term quality of life for students with severe disabilities and their families in providing increasing access to the general curriculum.

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Alicia F. Saunders (North Carolina CEC), Research Associate; Fred Spooner (North Carolina CEC), Professor of Special Education; Diane Browder (North Carolina CEC), Professor of Special Education; Shawnee Wakeman (North Carolina CEC), Clinical Assistant Professor; and Angela Lee (North Carolina CEC), Research Associate, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
Address correspondence regarding this article to Alicia Saunders, College of Education, Department of Special Education and Child Development, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223 (e-mail: A.Saunders@uncc.edu).
Support for this research was provided in part by Grant No. H373X10002 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, awarded to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.
TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 22–33.
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