



# College and Career Readiness Standards-in-Action

Foundational  
Unit

# 4

FACILITATOR GUIDE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS/LITERACY

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**CREATING  
HIGH-QUALITY  
WRITING PROMPTS**

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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 *building knowledge*—the third of these three advances. The previous unit shared the importance of identifying and asking text-dependent questions that require students to locate evidence within the text. This final unit equips adult educators with the tools and understanding needed to craft effective, high-quality writing prompts linked to what students have read.

Extensive research has shown students’ prior knowledge to be a strong predictor of their ability to comprehend or learn from complex texts.<sup>1</sup> E.D. Hirsch, Jr., founder of Core Knowledge, has argued for decades that the reading deficit is integrally bound to a knowledge deficit.<sup>2</sup> Studies have also shown that learning to present important information in an organized writing sample helps students generate a deeper understanding of what they read. Graham and Hebert argued in their Carnegie Corporation report *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (2010) that whether students are crafting a summary or writing an extended response for what they have read—or even taking notes about a text—they improve both their comprehension of the text and their writing skills.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hampton, S., and E. Kintsch. 2009. “Supporting Cumulative Knowledge Building Through Reading.” In *Adolescent Literacy, Field Tested: Effective Solutions for Every Classroom*, eds.

<sup>2</sup>E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Graham, S., and M. A. Hebert. 2010. *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

This final unit—Creating High-Quality Writing Prompts—is a direct response to these research findings. It focuses on a central method of building knowledge: reading content-rich texts and writing about these texts. The CCR Standards require the rich exploration of texts by students followed by their presentation of well-defended claims in writing. Writing Standard 9 explicitly requires students to draw evidence from texts to support analysis, reflection, or research.

There are several benefits of having students respond frequently to text-based writing prompts. First, the assignment reminds students of the importance of growing knowledge as it expects them to share what they learn from reading. Second, to complete the assignment students need to return to the text to synthesize and consolidate their learning. Third, students realize how much they have learned from reading when they write about complex text(s) from which they have gathered evidence. Fourth, students' writing about text(s) is an effective measuring stick, not only assessing their progress with reading but also evaluating (while simultaneously strengthening) their writing skills. And finally, central to college and career readiness is the ability to respond in writing to what is read.

The unit prepares adult educators by allowing them to work together to uncover what makes a high-quality writing prompt and how to create one themselves. The unit offers helpful guidance in determining whether or not a writing prompt successfully captures key teachings from a text, and how instruction could target the needs of students who are asked to perform such writing tasks.

## **Overview**

This final unit targets the importance of Key Advance 3 by highlighting how students learn from what they read. In Part One of this unit (Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts), participants will learn how to identify strong writing prompts

that will help students collect and articulate their learning. Through a brief presentation, participants will build a basic understanding of the value of high-quality writing prompts. They will evaluate two writing prompts that pertain to the now-familiar excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* to determine which writing prompt is aligned to the CCR Standards and would produce a richer and deeper response from students. They will also use the ELA/Literacy Anchor Standards to guide them in identifying which CCR Standards students would need to employ when responding to the prompt.

In Part Two of this unit (Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt), participants will build a writing prompt tied to Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union. From a set of previously identified high-quality, text-dependent questions, participants will be asked to pay close attention to the questions that would require students to go most deeply into Roosevelt’s speech to develop an answer. Again, participants will use the ELA/Literacy Anchor Standards to guide them in identifying which CCR Standards students would need to employ when responding to the prompt they are creating. This activity will help participants connect the earlier work of Unit 2 (Key Advance 1: Text Complexity) and Unit 3 (Key Advance 2: Evidence) to this culminating activity.

## Materials You Need

For Participants (Part One): Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts (one copy per participant):

- Directions for Participants
- Worksheet: Writing Prompts for *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Resource: CCR Anchor Standards
- Resource: Excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*

For Participants (Part Two): Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt (one copy per participant):

- Directions for Participants
- Resource: CCR Anchor Standards
- Resource: Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union
- Resource: Identifying Questions Worth Answering Answer Key for Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union

For Facilitators:

- Unit 4 PowerPoint Presentation: Creating High-Quality Writing Prompts
- Answer Key for Part One: Writing Prompts for *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
- Answer Key for Part Two: Writing Prompts for 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:

- 15 minutes – Introduce the unit.
- 15 minutes – Work in pairs or small groups to complete the Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts activity.
- 45 minutes – Work in pairs or small groups to complete the Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt activity.
- 15 minutes – Discuss reflections.

## Guidelines for Implementation

### Step 1: Preparations for Part One and Part Two, Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts and Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt

- 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) **Complete the two High-Quality Writing Prompts exercises.** This will help you understand the steps you are asking participants to go through.

- e) **Prepare the materials for participants.** Copy *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution* excerpt and the Roosevelt speech on different colored paper so that participants can spot them easily. In addition, for each participant, copy the two sets of directions, the Anchor Standards, and the Identifying Questions Worth Answering Answer Key for Eleanor Roosevelt’s Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union.
- 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 of Part One, Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts** (15 minutes to introduce; 15 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 4 focuses on Key Advance 3 (Building Knowledge), it is important to understand that the CCR Standards were developed to reflect and exemplify all three key advances: 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 Unit 3 the focus was on close reading and 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.

This final unit introduces 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 building knowledge through writing to sources.**

**Slide 4:** Present the objectives of the unit: 1) to show how valuable a well-crafted writing prompt can be as a summative learning activity and 2) to learn how to identify and create strong writing prompts.

**Slide 5:** Frame the research around the importance of writing to sources with a high-quality prompt. Discuss the findings showing that learning to present information in an organized writing sample helps to generate deeper understanding of what is read. It cultivates students' knowledge base, which the research states is inextricably bound to building students' reading comprehension and writing ability.

**Slide 6:** The CCR Standards are geared toward the idea that learning from what you read is one of the most important reasons to read. Enjoyment is important too, but the CCR Standards are quite practical on this point and privilege learning from text more.

So, in instruction, the big shift is to demand evidence from text(s) in student writing assignments. This includes performing short, focused research projects and responding to writing prompts that ask students to synthesize the knowledge they have gleaned from the evidence they have gathered from their reading. A good prompt spurs students to return to the text to synthesize and consolidate their learning. By requiring a final deep reading of the text, a text-based writing prompt actually strengthens reading comprehension at the same time that it assesses student understanding and builds writing skills.

**Begin the hands-on activity of Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts.**

**Slides 7-8:** *Distribute the participants' materials for Part One, Identifying High-Quality Writing Prompts.* This includes directions for participants, the Worksheet: Writing

Prompts for *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*, the CCR Anchor Standards, and the excerpt from *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*.

**Slides 9-11:** Provide directions to participants on how to complete the activity. To help participants build a high-quality writing prompt, leave up Slide 10, which includes guiding questions, while participants work for easy reference. Here are the directions to give participants:

1. Get out your copies of:
  - *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
  - CCR Anchor Standards
  - Worksheet: Writing Prompts for *The Words We Live By: Your Annotated Guide to the Constitution*
2. Work with a partner to determine which prompt is aligned to the CCR Standards and which prompt is not. For each of the two prompts you are examining, ask the following questions as you determine which prompt is stronger.
  - Is the question worth asking?
  - Does it provide students with an opportunity to explore what they have learned from the text?
  - Does it ask students to include evidence from the text in their response?
  - Does the prompt use the language of the CCR Standards where appropriate?
  - Is the prompt reasonable for the time and energy allotted?
3. After you have decided which prompt is the best, use the CCR Anchor Standards to determine which reading, writing, and language standards are embodied in the aligned writing prompt.

4. Share your results with the group at your table:
  - What is the value of the text-dependent prompt compared with the other prompt?
  - What CCR reading, writing, and language standards do you think students would address when working on responses to this prompt?
  - What changes in current practice might this type of writing require?

**Slide 12:** *Process the activity with participants.* Bring the group together and ask participants to share their insights about which prompt of the two is CCR-aligned. Ask for volunteers to say which CCR Anchor Standards they thought students would address when working on their responses to the text-dependent prompt. Participants should be able to express that a text-based prompt holds real value for students because it demands students engage deeply with the text and consolidate their understanding. Let participants know that the best way to test a prompt is to actually answer (or outline) it yourself to see if it results in the kind of essay you desired. This also allows them to see how long it might take students.

**Step 3: Implementation of Part Two, Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt** (45 minutes working in pairs or small groups)

**Begin the hands-on activity of Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt.**

**Slides 13-14:** *Distribute the participants' materials for Part Two, Generating a High-Quality Writing Prompt.* This includes directions for participants, the CCR Anchor Standards, Eleanor Roosevelt's Speech to the Members of the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Identifying Questions Worth Answering Answer Key for Eleanor Roosevelt's speech.

**Slides 15-17:** *Provide directions to participants on how to complete the activity.* Have the participants work at their tables in pairs or small groups to create a high-quality writing prompt for the Roosevelt speech. Writing a good prompt is much more difficult than it may seem initially because it requires a strong grasp of the text, and it takes time to determine the essential understanding(s) of a text. For easy reference, leave up the PowerPoint slide that includes criteria for building a high-quality prompt while participants work. Monitor participants' work throughout this process, and make sure they are on track to produce a prompt in the allotted time. Here are the directions to give participants:

*TIP: If participants have not recently read Roosevelt's speech, give them ample time to do so and to think through what she is trying to convey to her audience.*

1. Read the Roosevelt text and the high-quality, text-dependent questions written for it.
2. Use the essential understanding or central idea identified to begin framing the prompt. A great prompt should get students to their own grasp of that essential understanding.
3. Discuss possible prompts with your partner(s).
4. Examine the CCR Anchor Standards for reading and writing to determine which standards you want to have students focus on in fulfilling this prompt.
5. Agree on and write a prompt. Discuss whether it will produce writing for building an argument (CCR Writing Standard 1) or explanatory or informative writing (CCR Writing Standard 2), and label it.
6. Discuss the prompts you and your colleagues developed, and determine which of them best meet the following criteria:
  - Require students to gather, organize, and present evidence from what they read.

- Expect students to return to the text.
- Use the language of the CCR Standards where appropriate.
- Give writers an opportunity to explore what they learned from the text.
- Require an exploration of the most essential ideas from the text.
- Are reasonable in terms of the time and energy allotted to students to complete the task.

### **Reflections: Thinking Back and Looking Forward** (15 minutes)

**Slide 18:** Ask for volunteers to share with the group the prompts they created for the Roosevelt speech.

The best way to test a prompt is to answer or outline a response to it to see if it supports the kind of essay desired. This also allows you to see how long it might take students to complete. When instructors are busy, this activity can easily fall to the wayside. Learning how to develop good writing prompts needs to be nurtured through professional training opportunities and practice.

Close this unit by asking participants to share insights about the value of text-dependent writing prompts compared with other prompts:

- A good prompt demands that students return to and analyze the text in a way that drives them to identify what they know to be true about what they read.
- A bad prompt departs from the text and doesn't demand that students go back and engage deeply with it again.

Ask for some reflections from participants. Text-dependent writing provides students with opportunities to showcase what they have learned, assesses their progress with

writing, and evaluates their reading comprehension. Responding in writing to what is read is also central to college and career readiness.

**Slide 19:** Conclude the reflections and the unit by asking participants to discuss what they have learned and to consider the changes in their practice that this approach to writing might require. 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 or tools would strengthen your ability to do so?