

What Are Power Standards? And How Do I Use Them?

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Many educators have heard the term “power standards” or its close relative “prioritized standards.” These terms have been in use for over a decade as educators come to terms with ever-changing and voluminous standards that they are required to teach. It is reasonable that we, as teachers, need to determine the most critical standards upon which to focus instruction, and, likewise, the standards that are of lesser importance.

Larry Ainsworth, a well-known author on this topic, has defined prioritized standards as “a carefully selected subset of the total list of the grade-specific and course-specific standards within each content area that students must know and be able to do by the end of each school year in order to be prepared to enter the next grade level or course” in his books and presentations. I had the great honor of being one of his colleagues as he developed and disseminated his work as an associate at The Leadership & Learning Center (also known as The Center for Performance Assessment).

It is important to remember that a list of prioritized or “power” standards focuses instruction and assessment but does not remove responsibility for teaching the other standards. Elevating some standards to a higher status does not remove other standards; it instead relegates them to a supporting role.

Larry Ainsworth has often compared priority standards to fence posts and the other standards to the rails. Posts are driven far into the ground to anchor a fence, just as priority standards anchor curriculum and instruction. The rails, on the other hand, provide support. They are deployed in order to aid the depth of understanding of and application of the critical (priority) standards.



Generally, power standards are selected using specific criteria. Douglas Reeves has outlined one set of criteria in his article "The Safety Net Curriculum." These are endurance, readiness, and leverage. Endurance means that we consider what lasting concepts and skills should be included. In other words, what will be important for students to know and be able to do long after a school year has ended? In the Common Core, the skills related to effective argumentation represent this idea of endurance. Readiness means that a standard represents skills and/or concepts that will be important in subsequent years or courses. For example, learning to solve a one-step equation is an algebra prerequisite for later solving two-step equations and inequalities. Lastly, leverage represents skills and concepts that apply across disciplines. Being able to cite evidence is one such skill and is another skill prevalent in the Common Core standards in English language arts, literacy, and mathematics.

Larry Ainsworth has also provided the following three questions you can ask yourself when determining which standards are most important.

Questions to consider?

- Is it important in school?
- Is it important in life?
- Is it important for the high-stakes tests?

Given the two standards that follow, which is the priority standard, and which is the supporting? (These standards are anchor standards from the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy.)

- R.CCR.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
- R.CCR.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authorstake.

Notice that standard R.CCR.3 requires students to be able to conduct an analysis, of how and why individuals, events, and ideas unfold and contribute to the whole of an entire text. The verb analysis is considered to be at the fourth level in *Bloom's Taxonomy: Categories in the Cognitive Process Dimension*. Clearly students must be proficient at conducting such an analysis of a single text prior to being able to compare multiple texts of similar topics and themes as defined in standard R.CCR.9. Therefore, the second standard is the more cognitively complex, and the first can be viewed as a prerequisite to the second. While still rigorous, R.CCR.3 is identified as the supporting standard that is clustered or incorporated in the more cognitively complex power standard – or, in other words, it is a building block for standard R.CCR.9.

Once a set of prioritized standards is determined, ideally collaboratively, then instruction can be focused. Pacing should ensure that all priority standards are covered well during the school year and assessed multiple times (as authentically as possible). Supporting standards may or may not be assessed multiple times.

A good rule of thumb is that the priority standards make up about 75% of your instruction.

The Lake Washington School District in Redmond, WA has shared their work here: <http://www.lwsd.org/Parents/Teaching-Curriculum/Pages/Power-Standards.aspx>. It serves as an excellent example.

The following scholarly works are recommended for further study.

- Ainsworth, L. (2015). *Unwrapping the Common Core*. Englewood, CO: Lead + Learn Press.
- Ainsworth, L. and Viegut, D. (2006). *Common Formative Assessments: How to Connect Standards-Based Instruction and Assessment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Bailey, K. and Jakicic, C. (2012). *Common Formative Assessments: A Toolkit for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Peery, A. B., et al. (2012). *Navigating the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards*. Englewood, CO: Lead + Learn Press.
- Reeves, D. B. (2003). *The Safety Net Curriculum*. In *Power Standards: Identifying the Standards that Matter the Most* by Larry Ainsworth. Englewood, CO: Lead + Learn Press.