Connections: English Language Arts

Developing Critical Readers, Writers, and Thinkers with the Science of Reading and the Learning Sciences

Middle and high school literacy
Setting students up for success

By Kathleen Richards

For today's middle and high school students, the importance of becoming skilled readers and writers cannot be understated. Written language is an essential tool that allows for asynchronous communication, allowing information and ideas to be shared in a way that transcends space and time. Essential reading, writing, and analytical skills are prerequisites for higher education and careers that will enable students to thrive in life. These skills are developed over the course of a student's entire academic career, and the benefits of strong literacy skills are realized early on and continue to compound over time.

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In middle and high school, reading and writing aren't just the domain of English Language Arts (ELA), but also have a significant impact on how much students can learn and succeed in their other classes. While elementary students are mainly focused on developing the foundational literacy skills necessary for translating written text into speech, students in middle and high school must develop more advanced literacy skills that allow them to learn from and become critical readers of text. At this point, much of the knowledge students are expected to acquire comes from content-area reading, and writing becomes the mode through which students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge. Many students in the U.S. struggle with acquiring these advanced literacy skills, as evidenced by poor performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The most recent 2022 results show that only 31 percent of eighth graders performed at a Proficient or Advanced level on NAEP Reading, while 30 percent performed at a Below Basic level (Figure 1). These scores represent a decline in reading achievement since the last NAEP administration in 2019, which was already alarmingly low before the school disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic took effect (Figure 2). Students have fallen behind in reading, and less than half of teachers surveyed during the 2022 NAEP administration felt quite confident or extremely confident in their ability to address the learning loss that may have resulted from pandemic-related school closures (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).
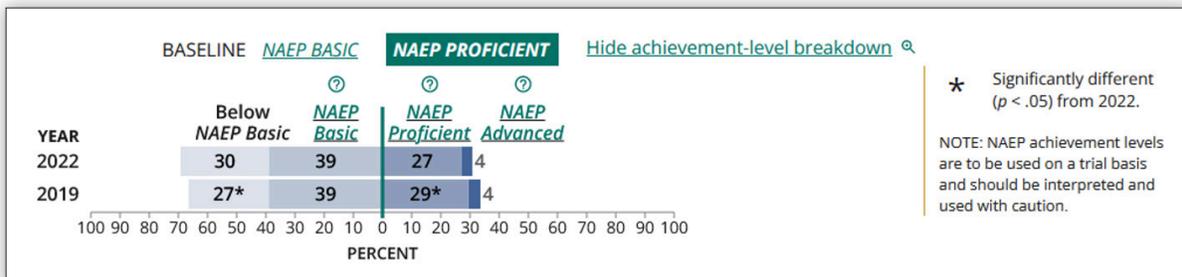

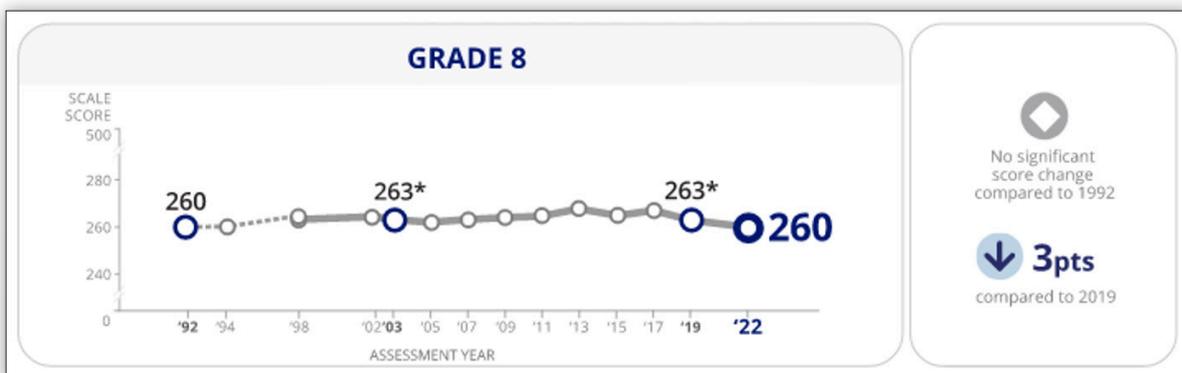Figure 1: Eighth grade NAEP Reading performance dropped in 2022 compared to 2019

Figure 2: Eighth grade NAEP Reading performance had slightly increased since 1992, but has declined in more

Clearly, a focus on learning recovery is critical at this point in time. Students who struggle with grade-level literacy in middle school will likely continue to struggle in high school and college. High school dropout rates are closely linked to literacy achievement, as struggling readers and writers have a hard time keeping up with the demands of high school (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Moreover, many students who do finish high school and are admitted to college arrive unprepared for the demands of the complex texts they'll need to read to complete their degree: only 41 percent of high school graduates who took the ACT in 2021–2022 read at the level required to succeed in first-year college courses (ACT, 2022).

Beyond schooling, literacy not only impacts an individual's initial earnings, but also their rate of earnings growth, likely because a person's level of literacy moderates the degree to which they are able to continue to learn and grow in a professional capacity (Reder, 2010). Literacy improves the welfare of individuals and of society as a whole: UNESCO has made worldwide literacy a key part of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because it "enables greater participation in the [labor] market; improved child and family health and nutrition; reduces poverty and expands life opportunities" (UNESCO, 2022). At the heart of it, a more literate society is a more equitable society.

The challenges of adolescent literacy

Given the central importance of strong literacy skills to success in school, career, and life, why aren't more middle and high school students becoming successful readers and writers? While students in these grades are expected to read, analyze, learn from, and write about increasingly complex texts, the emphasis on literacy instruction decreases in middle and high school. Much of the literacy demands placed on students come from the content areas, but content-area teachers are not typically trained in literacy development, nor do they see literacy instruction as part of their subject areas (Greenleaf & Heller, 2007). There is a wide range of skill diversity among adolescent readers, from students who continue to struggle with foundational reading skills, to those who can decode well enough but struggle to comprehend, to those who are challenged by providing a deeper analysis of a text's structure and meaning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Students also come to the classroom with different levels of English proficiency, with disabilities or special needs, and with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences. Teachers who may be unprepared to provide grade-level literacy instruction face an even greater challenge when they need to identify and address this diverse range of student characteristics equitably. Moreover, while motivation is a key factor in literacy development, motivation to read can be in short supply among adolescents, particularly among those who have struggled with literacy in the past (Kamil, et al., 2008).

Middle and high school teachers face challenges when it comes to adolescent literacy; effective pedagogical approaches and materials are essential to addressing these challenges. Decades of research into the Science of Reading and the Learning Sciences shed light on how people learn to read and write and what instructional approaches best facilitate this process; selecting an ELA program based on this science is a critical step in ensuring successful reading and writing development in middle and high school.

Providing effective ELA instruction based on the Science of Reading and the Learning Sciences

Concerns about low levels of literacy and its consequences have led to increased interest among educators and caregivers in pedagogical practices rooted in the Science of Reading and the Learning Sciences. The Science of Reading (SoR) is an interdisciplinary body of scientifically based research about how people learn to read and write, derived from fields including developmental psychology, educational psychology, cognitive psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and linguistics. This decades-long, international, and cross-linguistic body of research sheds light on reading development, sources of difficulty in learning to read, and pedagogical practices that support reading. A key element of SoR is that the research uses scientifically-sound experimental and quasi-experimental methods that enable researchers to test hypotheses and draw tenable conclusions about what caused the results (The Reading League, 2022). The Learning Sciences (LS) is also an interdisciplinary field that focuses more generally on understanding how people learn and which educational approaches are effective. LS also relies on scientifically based research from fields including educational psychology, cognitive psychology, computer science, linguistics, anthropology, special education, and educational technology. These two bodies of research can be used to guide the design of effective instructional experiences for middle and high school students. Key findings include:

- ELA skills depend on the development of cognitive processes that increase in complexity.
- Reading complex texts supports the development of higher-order cognitive processes.
- Reading, writing, speaking, and listening rely on shared knowledge bases and cognitive processes.
- Skilled reading results from the strategic execution of multiple skills.
- Students learn the most when instruction is responsive to their skill diversity.
- Engagement and motivation are essential to ELA development in middle and high school.

In the following sections, the research behind these key findings will be discussed, and their implementation within Perfection Learning's *Connections: English Language Arts* (*Connections: ELA*) program for grades 6–12 will be highlighted.

About *Connections: ELA*

Connections: ELA is a core English language arts program that provides instruction in grade 6–12 standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. *Connections: ELA* units are organized around an *Essential Question*, which thematically connects the literary and informational texts that students will read in the unit. Each chapter within a unit focuses on reading a text using a three-part close reading instructional routine that engages students with a different skill-based learning *Objective* for each reading, including understanding the main ideas of the text; analyzing the word choices, structures, and techniques the writer uses to communicate; and critically evaluating the text as a whole. Students read and annotate text multiple times to uncover deeper levels of meaning. The three close reading lessons include a set of *Focus On* practice activities in which students organize and reference textual evidence as they respond to the text; collaborate with peers through in-person and online discussions; synthesize evidence, ideas, and analyses in a writing task; and share responses with a partner through speaking and listening activities. *Writing and Language Minilessons* are also included with each chapter to provide comprehensive instruction and practice in written communication, grammar, and vocabulary. *Formative and Summative Assessments*, including *Project-Based Assessments* of writing, research, debate, and presentation skills, are provided at regular intervals throughout each chapter and unit to support teachers in making instructional decisions and evaluating mastery.

ELA skills depend on the development of cognitive processes that increase in complexity

The goals of ELA instruction in middle and high school range from developing basic reading comprehension and writing skills to reading and writing critically and analytically. National standards for middle and high school ELA include objectives targeting lower-level skills like explicit text comprehension (e.g., "Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text") as well as higher-order skills, such as evaluation of the structure, quality, and veracity of information in a text (e.g., "Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning") (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

To help educators classify wide-ranging educational objectives for instruction and assessment of learning, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom developed a hierarchical taxonomy of cognitive processes that range from simple to complex (Bloom, 1956). While the original taxonomy contained categories like "knowledge" and "comprehension," the taxonomy was updated in 2001 with categories like "remember" and "understand" that better capture the dynamic nature of these cognitive processes (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The revised taxonomy is shown in Figure 3.
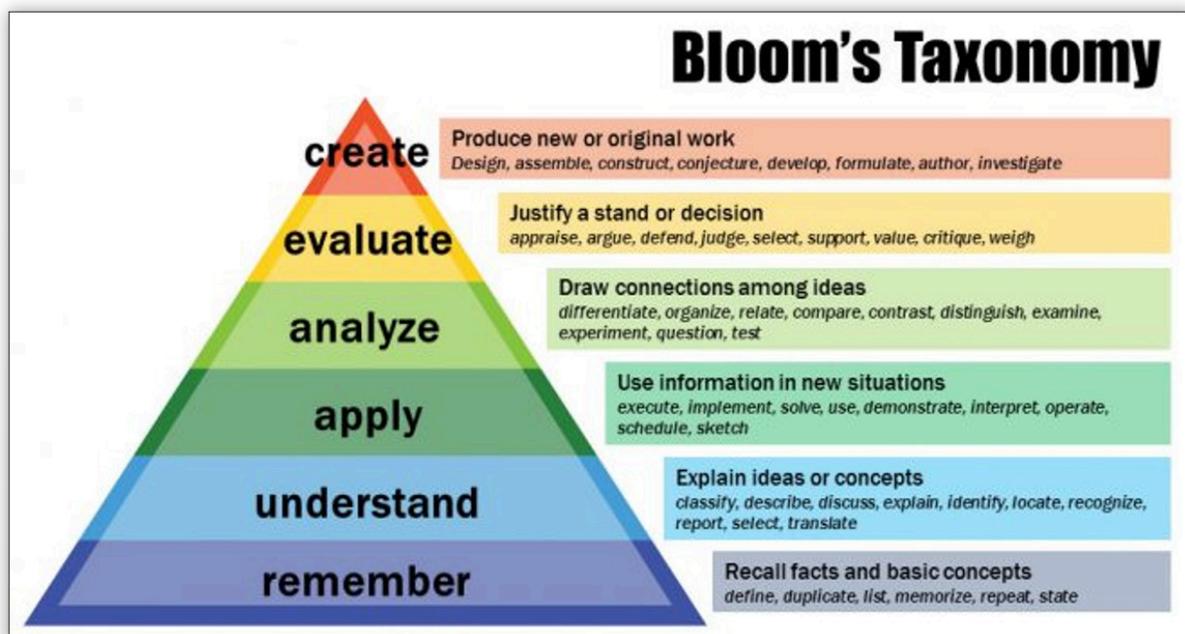
Figure 3: Bloom's Revised Taxonomy

The lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy focus on the simpler processes of remembering and understanding; the middle levels build on these basics with application of knowledge and skills to new contexts and analysis of structures and connections between concepts; and the higher levels include metacognitive skills like evaluating and critiquing information and its presentation as well the creation of one's own works. Literacy instruction is most effective when skills are developed explicitly, systematically, and cumulatively, from simple to complex, connecting new skills to what was previously learned (Cowen, 2022). Building curriculum around these hierarchical levels clarifies the goals of learning for teachers and students and provides a developmentally appropriate pathway to acquiring increasingly higher levels of skills and knowledge.

Close reading is an instructional approach that scaffolds students' ability to engage with text in increasingly complex ways, supporting systematic development of cognitive skills. According to Brown and Kappes (2012), close reading "involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices; the significance of word choice and syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times" (p. 2). Studies of close reading in middle and high school have found that repeated reading of complex, grade-level texts; use of a gradual release of responsibility instructional framework; annotating text while reading; responding to text-dependent questions; and discussion of the text have positive impacts on reading comprehension (Fisher, 2014; Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016; Paddle & Woolett, 2020; Janus, 2017).
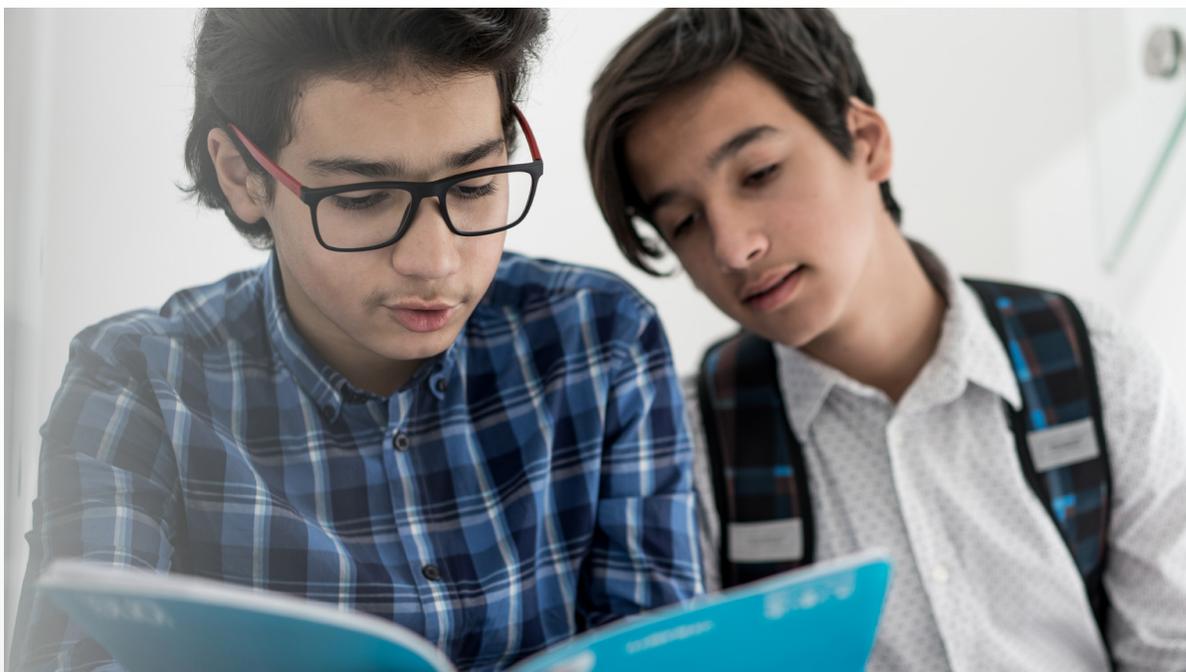
Supporting Cognitive Development with *Connections: ELA*

Connections: ELA's three-part close reading instructional routine, shown in Figure 4, supports explicit, systematic, and cumulative development of cognitive processes across the levels of Bloom's taxonomy using complex texts

Close Reading Task	Active Reading Focus	Skilled Reading Strategies
First Read: Focus on What?	What is the main idea?	• What is this mostly about? Which ideas are most important? • What message is the author trying to share? • What words or phrases stand out as important?
Second Read: Focus on How?	How does what the writer communicates support his or her purpose?	• How do details develop the main idea? • What types of language (figurative language, repetition, rhyme) does the writer use to create meaning? • From what point of view is the story told? Who is narrating the story? • How do the sentences/paragraphs in the text relate or fit together? • How does the structure of the text emphasize the ideas? Do I see causes/effects? problems/solutions? claims/reasons?
Third Read: Focus on Why or Why Not?	Why is this text important or meaningful to me— or to others?	• What can I learn from the text that will help me understand the world? • What can I learn that will make me a better writer? • Why is (or why isn't) this informational text convincing? Why is (or why isn't) this work of literature meaningful? • How does this text connect to other texts? Where have I seen this theme before? How do other presentations of this text (movie, artwork, etc.) communicate the theme in similar or different ways?

Figure 4: *Connections: English Language Arts* Three-Part Close Reading Instructional Routine

The structure of the close, repeated reading routine mirrors Bloom's Taxonomy. The first read targets remembering and understanding by focusing students on the main ideas of texts; the second read targets applying and analyzing by examining the author's use of structure and language to achieve the purpose of the text; and the third read targets evaluating and creating by exploring the greater meaning and importance of the text and reflecting on aspects of writing that can inspire the student's own creative process. After the third read, Project-Based Assessments challenge students to create their own works with research, writing, and presentation projects (Figure 5).
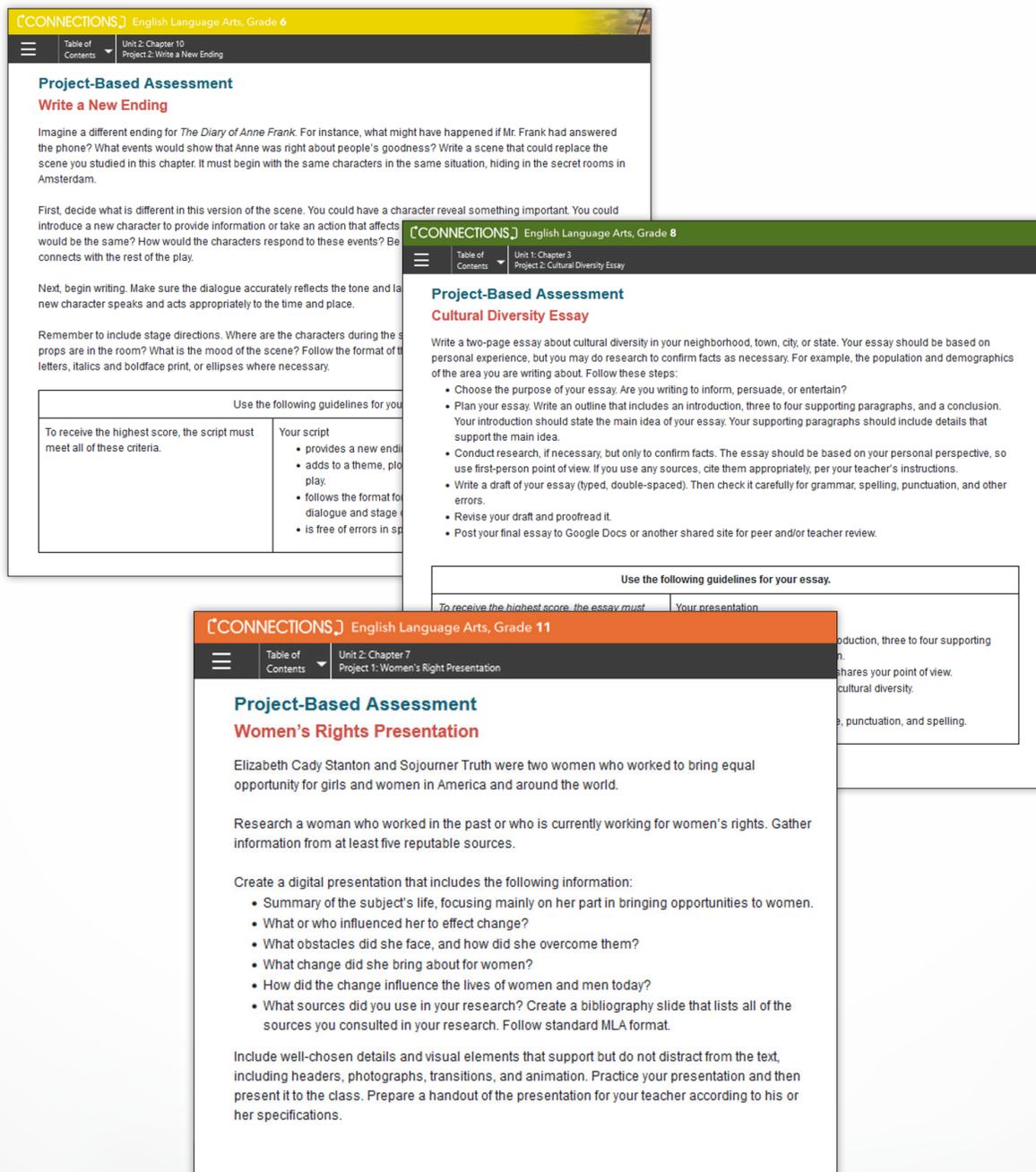
Figure 5: *Connections: ELA* Project-Based Assessments give students an opportunity to demonstrate higher-order cognitive skills of evaluation and creation

Connections: ELA supports the development of increasingly complex cognitive skills by using a gradual release of responsibility instructional approach in which the teacher first models the target skill, then provides scaffolded support as the students attempt the skill, and finally releases students to perform the skill independently, shifting the responsibility from the teacher to the student over time. The interactive edition includes a set of digital annotation tools that facilitate the text-dependent analysis required for more advanced levels of comprehension by allowing students to circle, underline, and make notes on text as they read, and reference their annotations when completing higher-order tasks, such as using textual evidence to support their responses (Figure 6). Whole- and small-group discussions, both in-person and online, are guided by text-dependent questions, supporting engagement and critical thinking (Figure 7).
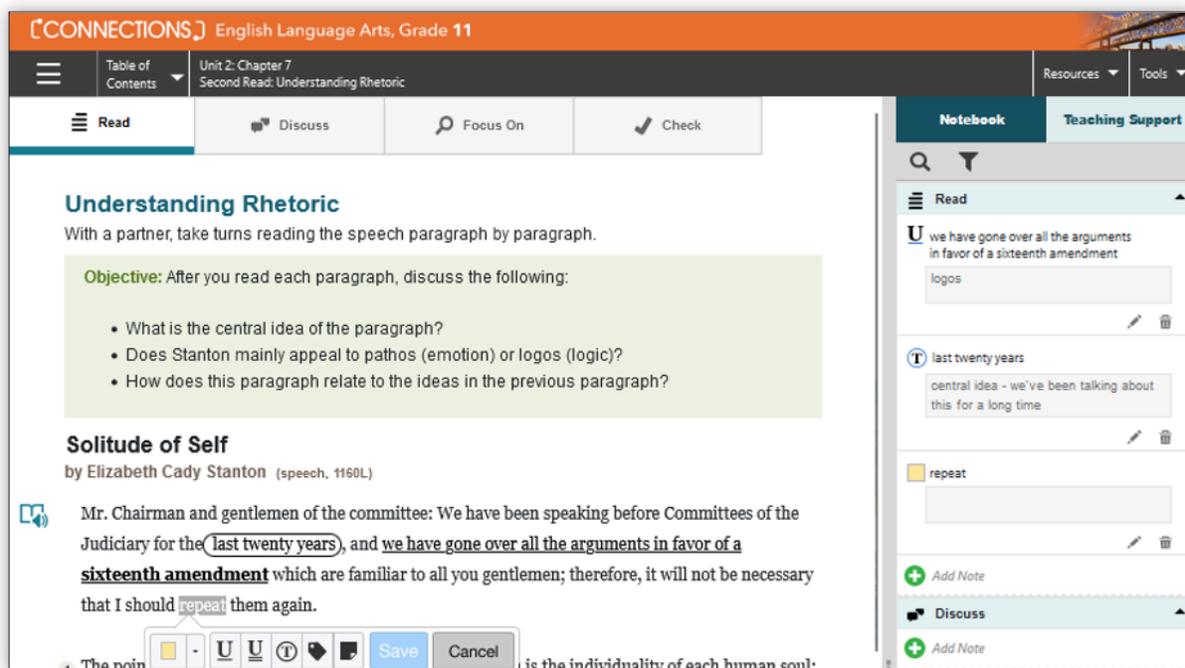
Figure 6: *Connections ELA* text Annotation Tools support engagement with complex text and text-dependent analysis
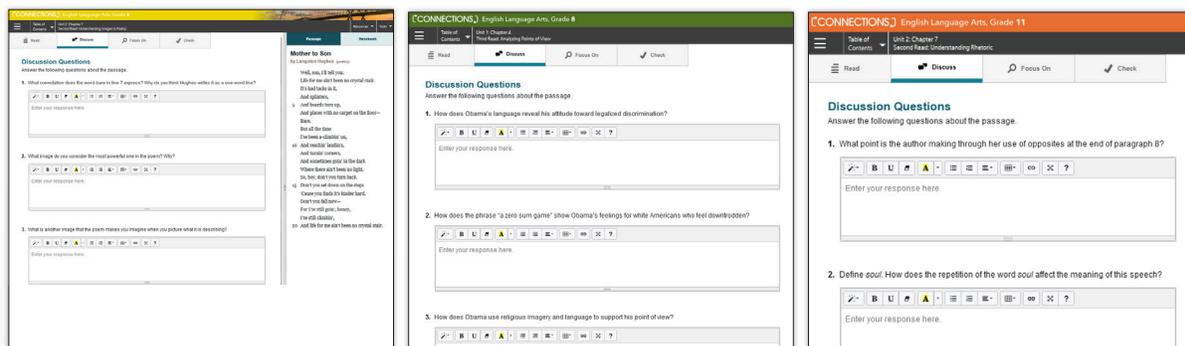
Figure 7: *Connections ELA* text-based discussion questions support engagement and critical thinking

Reading complex texts supports the development of higher-order cognitive processes

Middle and high school students need to read increasingly complex texts to prepare them for the reading demands of college and career and to support the development of the higher-order cognitive processes at the upper levels of Bloom's taxonomy. While the standards-based expectations for reading comprehension focus on related objectives across grades (e.g., "Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text" in grade 6 versus "Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain" in grade 12), the complexity of the texts students are expected to read in demonstrating mastery of the standards steadily increases across grades, forming a spiral in which similar skills are continually revisited at higher levels to enable and hone more sophisticated analyses of text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

To ensure students are reading texts at an appropriate level to support continued cognitive development and prepare them for reading in college and career, text complexity analysis is necessary. There are many factors that make texts more or less complex, including decodability, syntax, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, and the familiarity of the underlying ideas and concepts to the reader (Graesser, McNamara, Louwerse, & Cai, 2004). The authors of the Common Core State Standards developed a three-part model for evaluating text complexity, which includes analysis of quantitative levels, qualitative features, and reader and task characteristics (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Quantitative leveling is evaluated using readability formulas, which look at surface features such as sentence length, word length, and word frequency: texts with longer sentences and words and less common words are generally more difficult to read than texts with shorter sentences and words and more common words. However, quantitative measures cannot evaluate aspects of text complexity that pertain to the ideas in the text, the structure, or the knowledge demands required to comprehend it. Thus, texts are also evaluated against qualitative criteria by human reviewers to determine whether the content features are appropriate for supporting the learning goals of a particular grade level. Finally, both qualitative and quantitative features of text may be experienced as more or less complex depending on the characteristics of the reader or the reading task. A student with a high degree of background knowledge on the topic will likely find a text easier to understand than a student who has no knowledge of the topic, and a text that is considered "difficult" for a student's grade level may be more manageable with scaffolded tasks that support basic comprehension and guide more advanced text analysis.

Reading Complex Texts with *Connections: ELA*

Connections: ELA text selections are leveled using quantitative measures, qualitative criteria, and reader and task considerations. Quantitatively, *Connections: ELA* texts are leveled using the Lexile measure, which evaluates surface-level text complexity based on sentence length and word frequency (Metametrics, 2022). Ranges and median Lexile levels of *Connections: ELA* texts are shown in Figure 8, along with the ranges suggested in the Common Core State Standards by grade band (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Grade Band	*Connections: ELA* Lexile Ranges (Median)	Common Core Lexile Ranges
6–8	550-1440 (1040)	955-1155
9–10	420-1790 (1155)	1080-1305
11–12	540-2150 (1125)	1215-1355

Figure 8: Quantitative text complexity of *Connections ELA* texts

Connections: ELA text selections cover a wide range of Lexile levels. While the median Lexile levels of the texts closely correspond to the ranges suggested in the Common Core, some texts fall above and below these ranges. For instance, the eleventh and twelfth grade text selections in *Connections: ELA* include a 540 Lexile piece from *1984* by George Orwell as well as a 2150 Lexile piece from "The Emancipation Proclamation" by Abraham Lincoln.

Lexiles are particularly sensitive to word frequency and sentence length, which are only one aspect of text complexity, particularly in middle and high school when most students are proficient in translating text into speech. The Orwell piece demonstrates the importance of qualitative considerations when leveling texts. Qualitative factors that impact text complexity include its levels of meaning; how explicit the ideas are; how simple or conventional the structure is; how literal, clear, and informal the language is; and what the background knowledge requirements are (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Orwell is known for his simple and concise writing style, and while a 540 Lexile level is considered a second- to third-grade level, when considering the concepts addressed, the levels of meaning, and the historical and cultural background knowledge needed to understand it, *1984* is clearly more complex.

The Lincoln speech, on the other hand, demonstrates the importance of reader and task considerations in evaluating text complexity. "The Emancipation Proclamation" is a speech from the mid-1800s that deals with complex political topics and includes lengthy sentences and uncommon words. However, in the context of *Connections: ELA*'s scaffolded close reading routine, students are more capable of comprehending texts that might be too difficult to understand on their own. Thus, *Connections: ELA* texts are selected based on a combination of qualitative leveling and quantitative features and matched to an appropriately challenging skill focus that enables students to stretch beyond their current capabilities as they grow into independent readers and thinkers.

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening rely on shared knowledge bases and cognitive processes

The four modalities of language—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—are not totally distinct skills, but capacities that rely on shared knowledge bases and cognitive processes. Though written language skills (reading and writing) are dependent on earlier oral language skills (speaking and listening), they also have an impact on the development of more advanced oral language skills (Shanahan, 2006). When it comes to reading and writing, the relationship is even more reciprocal: reading and then writing about a topic reinforces learning about that topic; writing provides readers with first-hand experience in how text is constructed, which improves text comprehension overall (Graham & Hebert, 2010); and reading improves writing performance by providing models of well-written text (Graham, et al., 2017). Because the four language modalities rely on shared knowledge and skills such as vocabulary, syntax, and discourse organization, integrating instruction across modalities is an efficient way to reinforce shared skills.

Integrating Language Domains with *Connections: ELA*

Each chapter of *Connections: ELA* addresses all four modalities of language. The three close reading lessons focus on reading a text multiple times to understand its explicit and implicit meanings, analyzing the contribution of its structural and linguistic features to meaning, and evaluating its larger meaning and significance in the context of other texts, media, and the cultural milieu. Students write in response to reading text while completing the *Focus On* practice activities, and they engage in longer writing tasks through the Project-Based Assessments, such as researching and writing an argumentative essay modeled after the argumentative text they have just read and analyzed (Figure 9). These writing projects come with step-by-step instructions and clear grading rubrics to support students in implementing the features of effective writing that they have observed while reading text. Speaking and listening are integrated into each of the three close reading lessons via a *Discussion* activity: students first respond to text-dependent discussion questions in writing, and then they engage in partner or group discussions in which they are encouraged to build on one another's ideas and potentially revise their responses based on what they learned during the discussion. Language lessons that follow the three close reading lessons provide explicit instruction and practice in topics that support all four of the language modalities, including grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and genre-specific language features.

CONNECTIONS English Language Arts, Grade **7**

Table of Contents | Unit 3: Chapter 13 / Project 1: Op-Ed | Resources ▾ | Tools ▾

Project-Based Assessment
Op-Ed

An op-ed is a written opinion published by a newspaper or magazine that typically appears opposite the editorial page. It has a named author and focuses on an issue of importance.

Research the following question. Then write an op-ed for your local newspaper.

- What is the proper role of government, if any, in helping large groups of workers replaced by robots?

Follow these steps to help you.

- Read two op-eds from a local newspaper. Study how an op-ed is written. How does it start? How does the opinion develop? What reasons and information does it give?
- Research. Find three reliable sources on how governments have assisted workers who l...
- Take careful notes and put the ideas into your own words.
- Once you've done research, state your opinion on the question above.
- Write your op-ed. It should be between 200 and 300 words.
- Ask two people to read your op-ed and give you feedback. Revise your op-ed based on the...
- Check your writing for mistakes in grammar usage, punctuation, transitions, and spelling.

Use the following guidelines for your...

To receive the highest score, the op-ed must meet all of these criteria.	Your op-ed
	• includes a clearly s... • acknowledges an o... • demonstrates the a... • uses evidence to s... • uses correct gramm...

Write your op-ed below.

Enter your response here.

CONNECTIONS English Language Arts, Grade **12**

Table of Contents | Unit 1: Chapter 4 / Project 2: Argumentative Essay

Project-Based Assessment
Argumentative Essay

The argumentative essay requires you to research a topic, collect information, and evaluate evidence in order to establish a position. For this assignment, generate a question of your own about the effect of technology.

Examples include the following:

- *How does technology affect a global economy?*
- *How does technology affect higher education?*
- *How does technology affect the way we understand privacy?*

Follow these steps to write your argumentative essay.

- Thoroughly research your question, using current, reliable sources. Take notes on all pertinent information, including statistics, logic, and anecdotes. Keep track of your sources and write a proper Works Cited page.
- Write a clear thesis statement so you know what you are planning to claim. Make sure it is not too broad and it is something you can argue in a two-page paper (around 500 words).
- Write an introduction that first presents the topic and its importance before stating your position.
- Limit each body paragraph to one idea that supports your position. Include well-researched and relevant information.
- Include a paragraph that presents and refutes an opposing point of view.
- Write a conclusion that expands upon your thesis and reveals more than you did at the beginning (otherwise the reasoning is circular and the argument is redundant). Convince your reader that your topic and your point of view matter. Leave your reader thinking about the topic.

guidelines for your argumentative essay.

Your argumentative essay must

- be two pages (at least 500 words) with at least five well-developed paragraphs.
- include an opening paragraph that introduces the topic and convinces the reader of its importance.
- include well-researched evidence.
- present multiple viewpoints.
- leave no questions or doubt regarding your point of view.
- offer a conclusion that shows how your viewpoint matters.
- be free from errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage.

CONNECTIONS English Language Arts, Grade **9**

Table of Contents | Unit 3: Chapter 11 / Project 2: The American Indian Experience

Project-Based Assessment
The American Indian Experience

Victor, the narrator of the events, describes the hardships that many American Indians face in modern America. He reveals the prejudice and poverty that many live with every day.

Fill in the chart with your conclusions about the Native American experience.

What is the Native American experience of life in America (including stereotypes)?	What details from the text support or deny this conclusion?
Some American Indians struggle with alcoholism.	Victor's dad *drank a gallon of vodka a day.* The noise of the white girls throwing up reminds him of his father's hangovers.
Some American Indians live in poverty.	Enter your answer
The education at some schools on the reservation is inadequate.	Enter your answer

When you have finished, write an essay about how the story describes what life is like for some American Indians. Support your conclusions with direct quotations from the excerpt. Your essay should be three to five paragraphs long and should include at least two conclusions supported by the text. Begin with an introduction containing the main idea and end with a conclusion. Use the rubric below to evaluate your essay.

Figure 9: Project-Based Assessments include extended writing activities connected to the texts that students have read and analyzed

Figure 10: Speaking and listening skill development is integrated with reading and writing about text via Discussion Questions that students answer individually and then share with a partner or group

Skilled reading results from the strategic execution of multiple skills

To understand how people learn to read and why difficulties arise, researchers have developed and tested theoretical models of the skills used to read and comprehend text. Hollis Scarborough developed the reading rope, which shows how the two major strands of reading—word recognition and language comprehension—intertwine over time to become increasingly automatic and strategic, resulting in fluent reading with comprehension (Figure 11) (Scarborough, 2001). Word recognition and language comprehension are dependent upon one another; as psychologist Louisa Moats states, "A child cannot understand what he cannot decode, but what he decodes is meaningless unless he can understand it" (Moats, 2020, p. 15).

The Many Strands That Are Woven Into Skilled Reading

Background Knowledge (facts, concepts, etc.)

Vocabulary (breadth, precision, links, etc.)

Language Structure (syntax, semantics, etc.)

Verbal Reasoning (inference, metaphor, etc.)

Literacy Knowledge (print concepts, genres, etc.)

Phonological Awareness (syllables, phonemes, etc.)

Decoding (alphabetic principle, spelling-sound correspondences)

Sight Recognition (of familiar words)

increasingly strategic

increasingly automatic

SKILLED READING: Fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text comprehension.

Figure 11: Scarborough's (2001) Reading Rope

The reading rope shows how the two major strands break down further into subskills, which also develop in tandem and reinforce one another. The word recognition strand includes *phonological awareness*, which is the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds of language and is a precursor to decoding, in which the sounds of language are linked to letters and blended into words. Abundant decoding practice and study of irregular words results in *sight recognition*, or the ability to recognize words automatically. Automatic word recognition frees up cognitive resources to focus on comprehension of the text's meaning, which is essential for students to make the transition from learning to read text to reading to learn from text (Rasinski, 2004). Thus, word recognition skills are generally the domain of elementary school, while in middle and high school, much of the demands of reading lie in the language comprehension strand.

Language comprehension development begins at birth and continues through elementary school, but its importance increases as the language of texts becomes more complex and less similar to speech. Indeed, most struggling readers in middle and high school have issues with comprehension, not with word recognition (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Language comprehension relies on *background knowledge*, or knowledge of the world needed to understand concepts in a text; *vocabulary*, or the meanings, uses, and relationships of words and phrases; *language structures*, including syntax and semantics; verbal reasoning, or the ability to go beyond the surface of the text to understand non-literal language and make inferences; and *literacy knowledge*, or knowledge of the purpose, structure, and organization of print. The following sections will take a closer look at the role of language comprehension sub-skills in reading and effective instructional approaches for developing them in middle and high school students.

Background Knowledge

According to the construction-integration model of reading, comprehension is an interactive process of integrating new information into existing knowledge to create a mental representation of the text, called "the situation model" (Kintsch, 1988). Writers must leave some things unstated and assume that the reader brings knowledge of the world to the reading task; otherwise, every book would have to begin with an explanation of how the world works. When Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* writes, "The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit," readers must draw on their knowledge of bees' role in growing fruit to understand why a lack of bees would have an impact on the harvest (Carson, 1962).

Background knowledge supports overall comprehension of text by providing the reader with a schema, or mental structure for information, through which to interpret the content (Rumelhart, 1980). In everyday life, people have schemas for activities like going to a restaurant, which offer guidance in where to sit, how to order, and which utensils to use when eating. When readers have existing knowledge of a topic, their schema helps them track the information in the text and enhances their ability to construct a situation model: in fact, research has shown that poor readers with expertise in the topic of a text can demonstrate equal or better comprehension than good readers without such knowledge (Schneider, Korkel, & Weinert, 1989; Recht & Leslie, 1988). Readers don't need to be experts in every subject to become good comprehenders: having high levels of broad, general knowledge is strongly correlated with reading comprehension because broad knowledge makes it more likely that the reader will have at least some pre-existing schema for the topics in the text (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Knowledge also supports retention of text information because people learn by integrating new information into existing knowledge; existing knowledge provides a foundation upon which to build new knowledge learned from the text (Kintsch, 2009). Memory is reconstructive, and schemas help fill in the gaps of what is remembered less clearly from text by providing a cue to the types of information the text contained and how it was presented (Schacter, 2012).

Developing Background Knowledge with *Connections: ELA*

Given the importance of broad, general knowledge to reading comprehension, learning in the non-ELA subject areas, such as science and social studies, plays a major role in developing background knowledge, particularly for informational texts. However, background knowledge is such an important aspect of reading that it must be addressed within ELA instruction as well.

Wide reading on a range of topics is an effective strategy that ELA teachers can use to help build their students' background knowledge—the more students are exposed to new concepts and ideas, the more likely they'll be able to connect what they read to existing knowledge and integrate the new information, resulting in learning. *Connections: ELA* supports wide reading by providing a broad and diverse set of literary and informational reading selections that address topics such as current events (e.g., diversity in society, equality and justice, the impact of technology), universal themes (e.g., freedom, identity and the forces that shape us), and culture and history (e.g., the Native American experience, the role of women throughout history). A sample of *Connections: ELA*'s reading selections is shown in Figure 12.
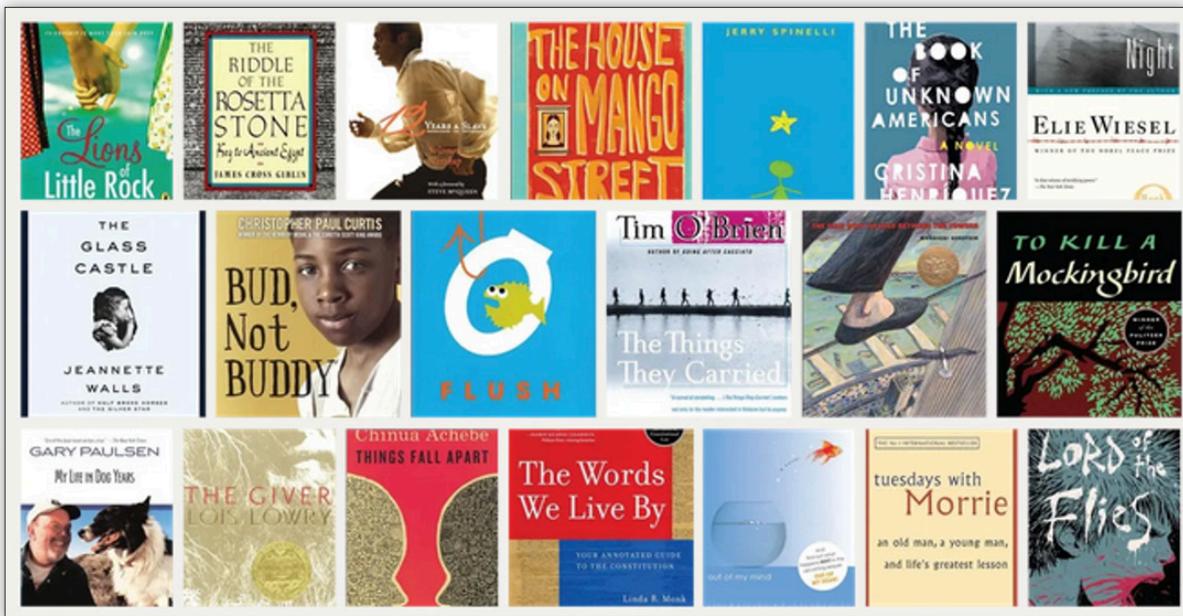
Figure 12: Text selections in *Connections: ELA* that support wide reading and background knowledge development

In addition to building general background knowledge, ELA teachers can review specific background knowledge that is essential to understanding a particular text before students read it. As part of *Connections: ELA*'s close reading routine, students work through a *Preview Concepts* activity that pre-teaches (or frontloads) concepts that will help them comprehend the text. Teachers have access to *Background Notes* and *About the Author* within the Teacher Edition, so they can provide students with information on the time, location, and historical context of the text, as well as the author's background. *Tech-Connect Suggestions* provide links to additional sources of information related to the text to help students develop context for what they will read (Figure 13).

Figure 13: *Preview Concepts* activities, *Tech-Connect Suggestions, Background Notes*, and *About the Author* help students build and activate background knowledge relevant to the texts they read

Figure 13: *Preview Concepts* activities, *Tech-Connect Suggestions, Background Notes*, and *About the Author* help students build and activate background knowledge relevant to the texts they read

Vocabulary

To understand a text's meaning, readers must understand the meaning of the words and phrases it contains. While vocabulary is often thought of in terms of breadth, or the number of words known, vocabulary depth, or the richness of vocabulary knowledge, may be even more important to reading comprehension because of the way vocabulary is organized and accessed in the brain (Willingham, 2017). Rather than discrete, dictionary-like entries, vocabulary is represented as interconnected conceptual networks that include pronunciation, (multiple) meanings, usage, parts of speech, morphemes, and related words. Each time a word is encountered, the entire network is activated and the activation spreads to related concepts, so students with richer networks can bring more knowledge to bear on comprehending the text and inferring what's not stated explicitly.

Educated adult native speakers of English know about 17,000 of the 58,000 base words in the English language, which amounts to learning about 1,000 words per year of childhood—too many to teach directly (Goulden, Nation, & Read, 1990). Most vocabulary is acquired through incidental exposure rather than through direct instruction, and by fourth grade, most incidental exposure to new vocabulary occurs via reading rather than speaking and listening because many words that are rarely used in speech are used more often in writing (Nippold, 1998; Webb & Nation, 2017). Incidental learning of vocabulary requires students to read voraciously because it takes many exposures to words in context to develop a rich and deep vocabulary network (Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999). As a result, those who lack vocabulary proficiency are likely to struggle with comprehending text and may miss opportunities to increase their vocabulary knowledge incidentally through reading. This cycle has been called a "Matthew Effect," based on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew about how the rich become richer while the poor become poorer. Indeed, students with greater vocabulary knowledge are better equipped to comprehend text and enrich their vocabulary by encountering new words in increasingly complex texts (Stanovich, 1986; Cain & Oakhill, 2011).

Although indirect exposure plays a larger role in building vocabulary, direct instruction enhances vocabulary acquisition because it supports students' comprehension of words in texts and helps them acquire complex words that are difficult to understand based on context. Effective direct vocabulary instruction targets high-utility academic and domain-specific words (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013) and covers not only the meaning and use of words, but also of word parts, or morphology. Morphology instruction is particularly efficient because it helps students determine the meaning of a large number of unknown words based on knowledge of a smaller set of word parts (Bowers, Kirby, & Deacon, 2010). For instance, if a student knows what a "sequel" is and knows what the prefix "pre-" means, they could determine the meaning of the word "prequel" when they encounter it in text.

Developing Vocabulary with *Connections: ELA*

Vocabulary growth results from a combination of both incidental exposure and direct instruction. To build a rich vocabulary through incidental exposure, students must read widely on a variety of topics; ELA teachers can encourage this aspect of vocabulary development by assigning texts containing words that are likely to be unfamiliar to students. *Connections: ELA* selections cover a broad range of literary and informational topics and include academic and domain-specific vocabulary words that challenge students to expand and enrich their vocabulary networks. Students encounter these words in context while reading, and *Connection:s ELA* also provides direct instruction of their meanings and usage. *Preview Vocabulary* and *Preview Academic Vocabulary* features provide teachers with lists and *Classroom Slides* of high-utility academic words from the text and domain-specific words needed to analyze and evaluate the text through writing or speaking. Teachers can pre-teach these words to support students in their subsequent reading and discussion of the text. Students have the opportunity to define and use these words in the *Passage Vocabulary* and *Academic Vocabulary* activities (Figure 14).

Figure 14: *Preview Vocabulary word* lists and *Classroom Slides,* as well as *Academic Vocabulary* and *Passage Vocabulary* activities, provide direct vocabulary instruction before and after indirect exposure to words through reading the text

Connections: ELA also provides morphology instruction and practice as part of Language lessons (Figure 15). Students are explicitly taught the meaning of individual, high-utility morphemes—prefixes, suffixes, and roots—and then practice using structural analysis to define and use unfamiliar words in context. Morphology instruction bridges both word meaning and grammar, or syntax (the focus of the next section, Language Structures): students learn how suffixes can change a word's part of speech and provide information about the word's function in a sentence. Because morphological awareness is particularly beneficial for ELLs developing their vocabulary, *ELL Support* suggestions offer games and activities to provide students learning English with additional exposure to and practice with morphemes.

Figure 15: *Connections: ELA* Language lessons provide direct instruction and practice in morphology and include additional support for ELL students

Language Structures

In addition to determining the meaning of the individual words in text, readers must be able to parse the syntactic and semantic relationships between the words. Syntax is grammar, which is represented by word order and punctuation. "John gave the book to Jill" means something different than "Jill gave the book to John," even though the words are the same. Semantics is the meaning of words and phrases as they combine to create the meaning and tone of the text. The phrase "It was a dark and stormy night" evokes a very different feeling and interpretation than "It was a cloudy, windy, and rainy night," even though the facts are essentially the same.

Implicit understanding of syntactic and semantic relationships in oral language develops naturally in young children. The language structures of early elementary school books are similar to what a child hears in oral language, so syntax and semantics are less of a challenge in early literacy development for native, typically developing speakers of a language, though explicit instruction may be necessary for language learners or students with disabilities at all grade levels (Nippold, 2017). By middle and high school, the language of texts becomes less similar to oral language as it becomes more academic. The syntactic features of written academic language are more complex, such as the use of multiple phrases and clauses within a sentence, and more compact, such as the use of nominalization, or transformation of words like verbs and adjectives into nouns (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). The sentence "You heat water, and it evaporates faster" is less syntactically complex than "The increasing evaporation of water is due to rising temperatures," though the meaning is similar. From a semantic perspective, written academic language tends to be precise, formal, abstract, and discipline-specific, resulting in the use of a wider range of less-common words with more specific and technical meanings (e.g., "rising temperatures" instead of "heat"). Understanding the semantic relationships between words within and across sentences helps readers develop a more nuanced interpretation of the author's message.

Developing Knowledge of Language Structures with *Connections: ELA*

Both fluent speakers and learners of English will need instruction to parse the syntactic structures and semantic relationships found in complex, academic texts. In *Connections: ELA*, after close reading the text, the Language lesson provides instruction in interpreting syntactic and semantic structures relevant to the text and prompts students to apply the target language skill of the lesson in writing (Figure 16). Syntactic instruction covers topics such as complex clause constructions, anaphora, parallelism, active and passive voice, parts of speech, and punctuation. Semantic instruction focuses on authors' language choices and their impact on tone and message, and includes topics such as sensory language, diction, dialects, and denotation and connotation. *ELA Support* in the teacher's guide provides instructional strategies to scaffold the learning of English language learners (ELLs) who may find the skill particularly challenging. Students also complete *Project-Based Assessments* to demonstrate understanding of the text through multimodal means, using standard English constructions in their work.

Figure 16: *Connections: ELA* Language lessons support development of language structure knowledge

Verbal Reasoning

The literal interpretation of a text is only part of its meaning—language is full of ambiguity, and readers often must go beyond what is explicitly stated to understand an author's implicit message. Figurative language such as, "The general was a cheetah on the prowl" must be recognized and interpreted non-literally to avoid confusion. Inferencing is required to "fill in the gaps" with logical connections between ideas: to understand the sentences "The lightning struck. The hut collapsed.", one must draw on background knowledge that lightning strikes can cause fires and that fires can cause buildings to collapse to infer that the action in the first sentence caused the result in the second sentence. (Singer, 2007).

Verbal reasoning, also called analogical reasoning, is a higher-order cognitive skill in which similarities between concepts are identified and commonalities between them are inferred within a new context (Vendetti, Matlen, Richland, & Bunge, 2015). For reading comprehension, verbal reasoning includes the ability to recognize and interpret literal versus figurative language and to know when and how to make inferences about what is unstated in a text. Thus, verbal reasoning is a strategic skill that is dependent on a reader's vocabulary (Kievit, et al., 2017) and background knowledge (Singer, 2007). Comprehension strategies instruction teaches students to be active readers who monitor their comprehension, notice when something doesn't make sense, and draw upon strategies such as rereading more closely and making inferences to repair comprehension (Kamil, et al., 2008).

Developing Verbal Reasoning with *Connections: ELA*

Teaching students to recognize and interpret figurative language in text is an important aspect of verbal reasoning instruction. As part of *Connection:s ELA*'s close reading *Focus On* activities, students identify, interpret, and evaluate an author's use of figurative language and literary devices, including metaphors, similes, personification, allusions, hyperboles, and euphemisms. Students also focus on strategically recognizing when they need to make inferences by combining background knowledge with textual evidence to fill the gaps in their situation model of the text (Figure 17). Students use Annotation Tools while reading to mark relevant textual evidence as guided by the Objective provided at the beginning of each close read, providing a purpose for reading and grounding the inferencing process. The Teacher Edition provides comprehension strategies for teachers to display in the classroom as a reminder for students as they are reading text, encouraging them to read actively, recognize the need to apply verbal reasoning that goes beyond the surface meaning of the text, and implement strategies to unpack the layers of meaning of the text.

Figure 17: Interpreting figurative language and strategically making inferences are part of *Connections: ELA*'s close reading instructional routine for verbal reasoning development

Literacy Knowledge

Just as studying a map helps people navigate a new area, literacy knowledge about the purposes, structures, and features of print helps readers navigate, understand, and learn from text. In early reading, literacy knowledge pertains to basic concepts of print, including the idea that print carries meaning, how books should be held, and how to track print across pages (Clay, 1993). As students begin reading across a wider range of genres and text becomes more complex, explicit instruction about genre-specific text structures can support them in comprehending and retaining information from text (Hall-Mills & Marante, 2020; Hebert, Bohaty, Nelson, & Brown, 2016).

Text structure is how authors organize and connect their ideas in support of their purpose for writing. Awareness of a text's structure provides readers with a schema into which they can organize text information as they read, guiding their attention, inferences, and interpretations of the text, and supporting their retention of information after reading (Graesser & Nakamura, 1982). Literacy knowledge is genre-specific, so reading across a wide range of genres and topics can help students build and refine supportive structural schemas. Researchers have found that explicit instruction in text organization patterns, text features, and signal words that can cue readers to the patterns, and the use of graphic organizers to conceptualize structures have an impact on students' reading comprehension and retention of information (Akhondi, Malayeri, & Samad, 2011). Writing supports development of knowledge about text structure through application, which improves reading comprehension as well (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

Developing Literacy Knowledge with *Connections: ELA*

Connections ELA reading selections expose students to texts with a diverse range of structures, including novels, short stories, plays, poetry, memoirs, essays, reports, informational texts, speeches, news articles, and historical texts. As part of *Connections: ELA*'s close reading instructional routine, students examine genre-specific structural features of texts. *Making Connections* activities that precede close reading include a focus on features such as headings and bolded words that can help students orient themselves to the structure of a text, while *Focus On* activities after close reading guide students through an analysis of text structure and its impact on meaning (Figure 18). For literary texts, instruction focuses on plot structure such as chronological order and flashbacks; narrative elements such as characters, settings, and conflict resolution; and structural elements specific to poetry and drama such as stanzas and acts. For informational texts, structures such as description, cause and effect, and problem and solution are examined, along with text features such as headings and key words that are clues to the text's organizational pattern. Graphic organizers are a recurring feature of *Connections: ELA* literary knowledge instruction, serving as schematic representations of a text's structure, and *Project-Based Assessments* include longer writing activities that allow students to practice text structures in their own writing.
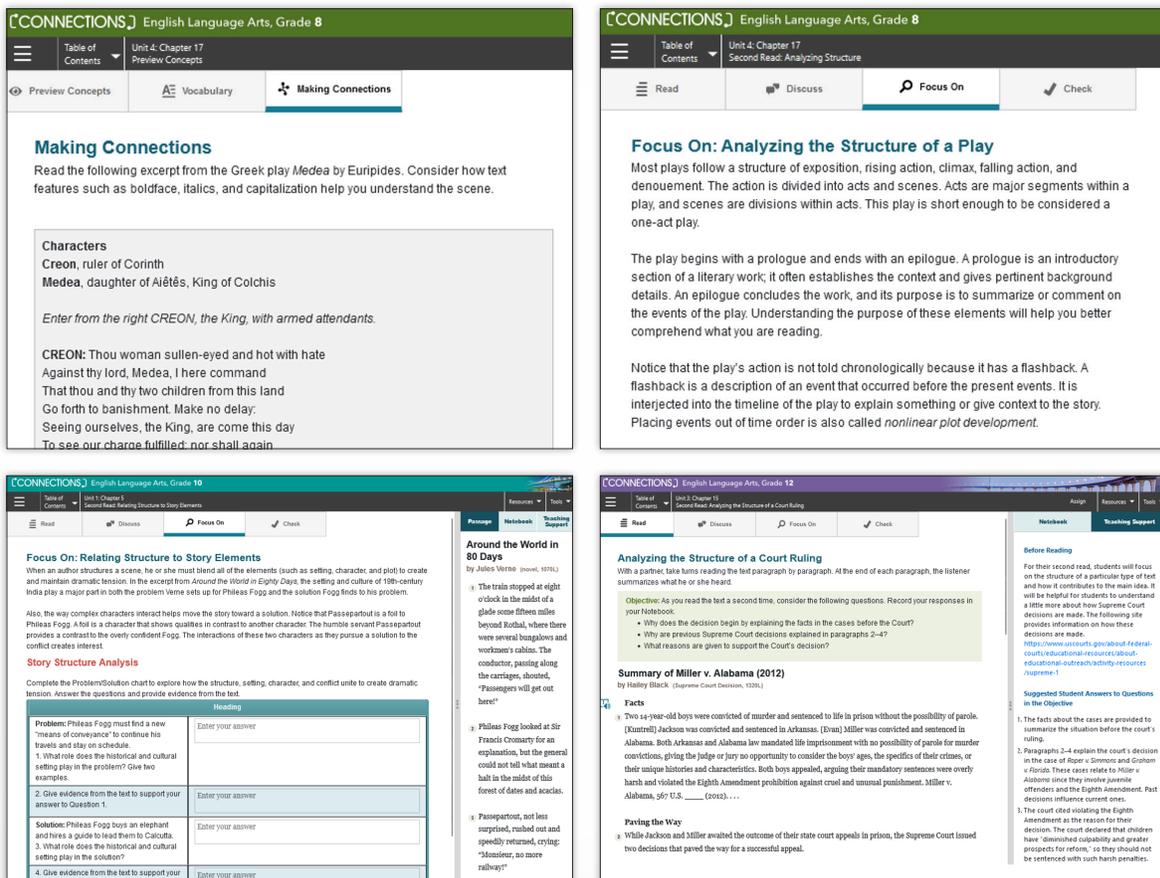
Figure 18: *Connections: ELA* focuses students' attention on text features and structures that can help them mentally organize textual information as they read

Students learn the most when instruction is responsive to their skill diversity

Reading is a multifaceted skill made up of sub-skills that are developed and coordinated over the course of years. Thus, by the time students reach middle and high school, they come to the classroom with diverse strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and experience. All learners are unique, and providing instruction and practice opportunities that are targeted to their specific learner profile is the most effective and equitable way to move all students towards common, grade-level goals (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Neuroscience research has shown that the emotions students experience during learning have an impact on the brain's ability to remember what was taught. Instruction at a level that is too difficult results in frustration and increases the production of the stress hormone cortisol, which orients humans towards responding to threats in the immediate environment. The increase in cortisol distracts the brain from focusing on the learning objective in favor of identifying and eliminating the stressor. Novelty, on the other hand, is extremely attractive to the brain, and results in the release of dopamine, which gives feelings of pleasure and increased focus, motivation, and memory. Thus, when a learning experience is too easy or repetitive, students may become bored and forget any knowledge gained, but when a learning experience is novel and appropriate to ability, students are more likely to be engaged and retain what they learn. (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018).

Teachers can be responsive to skill diversity in their classrooms by using deliberate practice to make learning experiences targeted and impactful for all students. Deliberate practice is an instructional approach that includes setting clear goals, conducting ongoing formative assessment to determine strengths and needs and to offer specific feedback, and providing differentiated instruction and practice opportunities that fall within the student's zone of proximal development, a level that is challenging enough to stimulate learning but not so challenging as to cause frustration (Ericsson & Pool, 2016).

Goal Setting with *Connections: ELA*

Attention is a limited resource, and to learn effectively, students must know where to focus their attention (Weinstein, Sumeracki, & Caviglioli, 2019). Providing learning objectives at the beginning of a lesson gives students a goal on which to focus. *Connections: ELA* lessons are organized around clear and specific learning *Objectives* that are stated at the beginning of each lesson segment, so students know the expectations. The learning objective is reinforced during the reading activity through the *Objective Lens*, which instructs the students to identify and annotate elements of the text that are directly related to the learning objective (Figure 19).

Figure 19: *Connections: ELA* supports goal setting with clearly stated *Objectives*, which are reinforced in the text with the *Objective Lens*

Ongoing Formative Assessment and Feedback with *Connections: ELA*

Understanding students' patterns of strengths and needs is key to delivering instruction that addresses skill diversity. Formative assessment, or assessment for learning, provides teachers with data on students' skill development and is used to plan and modify instruction (Wiliam, 2011). Formative assessment is often contrasted with summative assessment, which is used to draw conclusions about learning that already took place, without the intent to use the data for instructional planning or feedback. Formative assessments are informal, low stakes, and often non-standardized measures such as exit tickets and project-based assessments, which are administered frequently enough to monitor small increments of progress towards mastery of learning objectives and support timely adjustments to instruction (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). A key aspect of formative assessment is that the data must be used as feedback to both the teacher and the students. For the teacher, formative assessment provides data on the efficacy of the prior instruction and informs future instruction. For the students, formative assessment measures their current progress and informs next steps toward mastery of the objectives.

Figure 20: Three types of formative assessment that *Connections: ELA* teachers can use to understand student skill development, provide feedback, and plan targeted instruction

Connections: ELA helps teachers pinpoint student strengths and needs with three types of formative assessments (Figure 20). Each of the three reads in the close reading routine is followed by a multiple-choice *Check Quiz* (in the interactive edition) that measures close reading and the focus skill outlined in the learning objective. These *Check Quizzes* are auto-scored so that teachers can review and respond to the results right away. *Project-Based Assessments* are also included with every chapter to provide multi-modal, authentic assessment of student skill development through writing, research, debate, and presentation. These rubric-graded assessments allow students to demonstrate higher-order skills that require critical thinking and synthesis of information. Teachers can add written feedback as well that is tailored to students' responses. *Connect to Testing* prepares students for state and national high-stakes assessments, focusing on academic vocabulary and *Focus On* skills from the chapter. When these assessments are administered digitally using the interactive edition of *Connections: ELA*, teachers have access to detailed, standards-based reporting available at the class and individual level (Figure 21). Teachers can view item analysis and student responses to determine individual, small group, or whole group needs for core (e.g., reteaching), intervention, and enrichment instruction. Students can also view their scores and written feedback when they log into the *Connections: ELA* platform, providing them with information about where they have performed well and where they can improve.
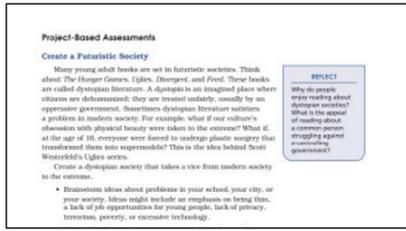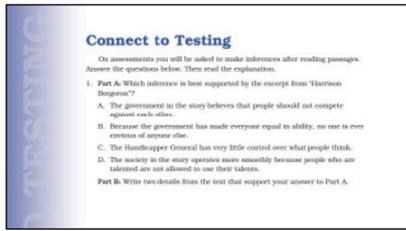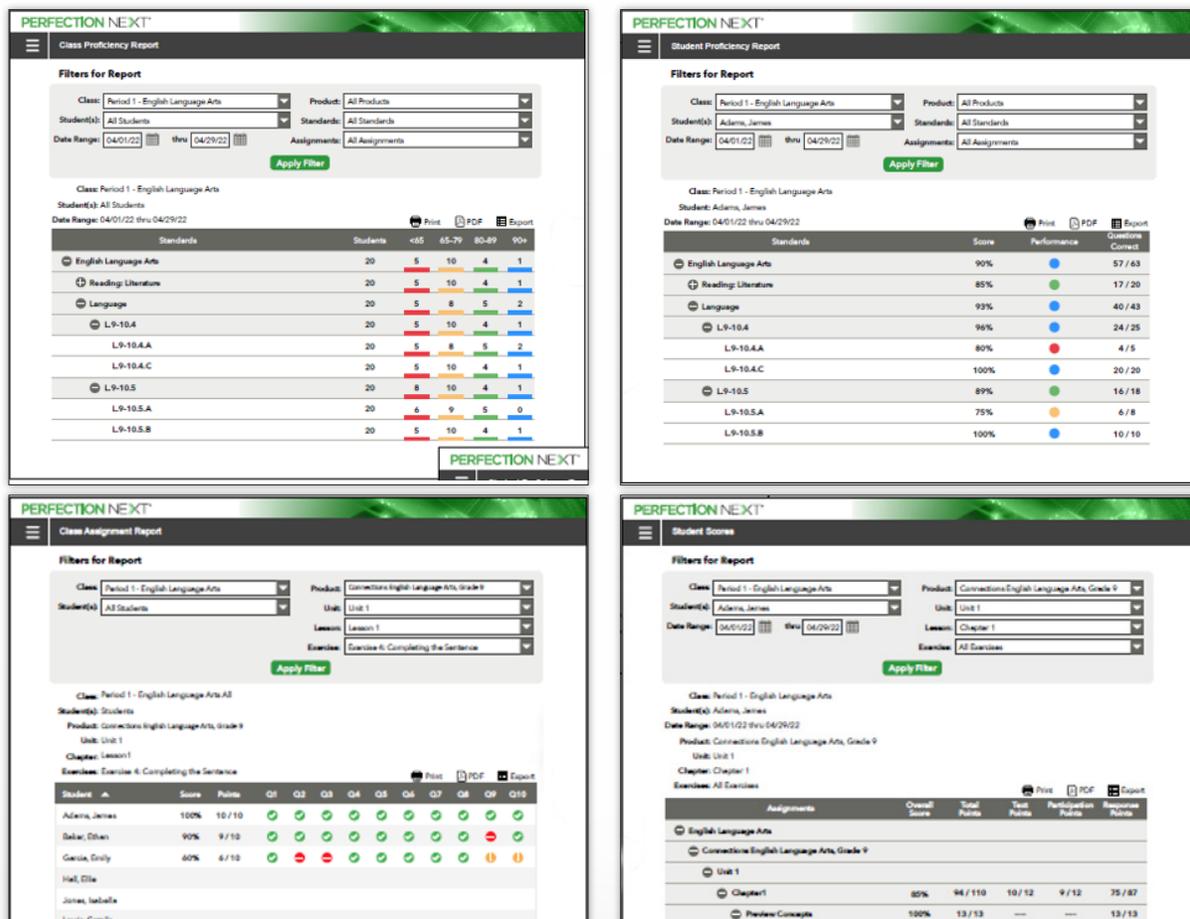
Figure 21: Detailed reports help teachers understand standards-based proficiency at the individual and classroom level

Differentiated Instruction with *Connections: ELA*

Teachers can differentiate instruction by varying how students access the content, the activities students undertake to engage with the content, and the ways that students can demonstrate their learning (Tomlinson, 1995). Differentiation does not require completely individualized lesson plans for each student in a class. Rather, differentiation is about learning equity: it requires that the teacher understand how students are responding to instruction and make appropriate modifications as needed to ensure that all students are making progress.

Connections: ELA facilitates manageable differentiation through point-of-use support and resources in the Teacher Edition, a supplemental English Language Learners Teacher's Resource, and student-facing supports in the Immersive Reader. In the Teacher Edition, *Remediation and ELL Support* features provide scaffolding suggestions that are tailored to the lessons themselves, such as breaking down a larger assignment into smaller parts, having students work on an assignment in small groups, and providing sentence frames to help ELL students respond in writing (Figure 22). The English Language Learners Teacher's Resource provides additional guidance in understanding ELLs' language levels, using heterogenous grouping to support ELLs, and making instructional modifications for beginning, intermediate, and advanced ELLs while teaching close reading, vocabulary, and reading passages (Figure 23). The Immersive Reader features in the interactive edition of *Connections: ELA* provide additional scaffolds and accessibility features that students can implement individually: text-to-speech, translation into more than 100 languages, and a picture dictionary to help struggling readers and ELL students access the content; and accessibility features such as text size, spacing, font, and color options help students with disabilities read online text (Figure 24).
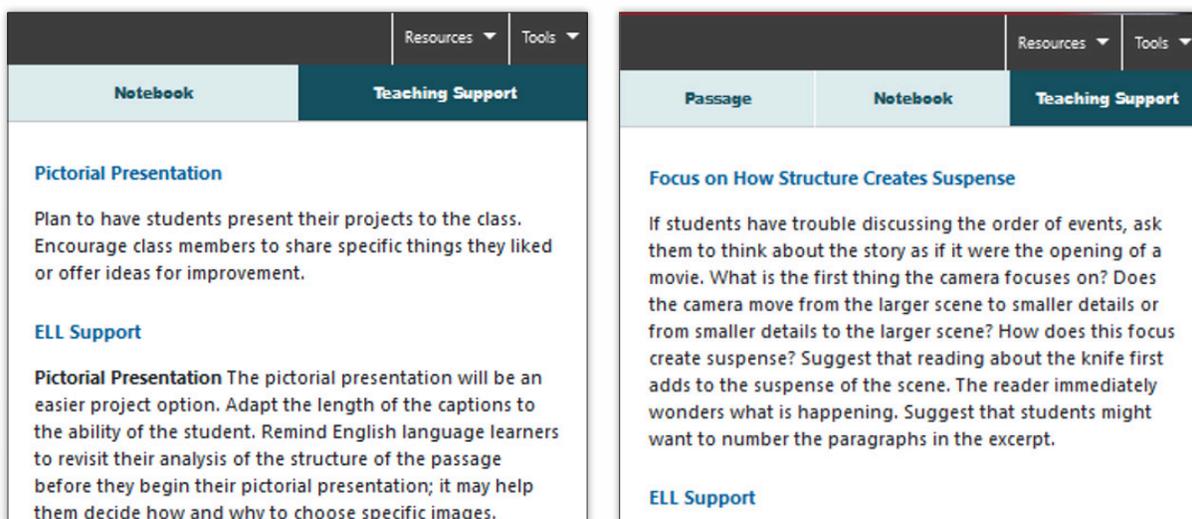
Figure 22: *ELL Support and Remediation* teaching support is provided at point of use so teachers can provide responsive instruction targeted to their students' needs
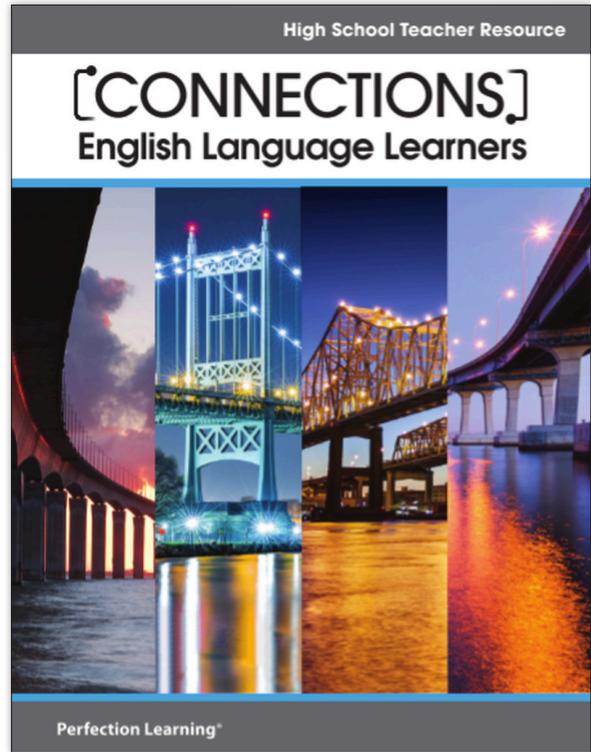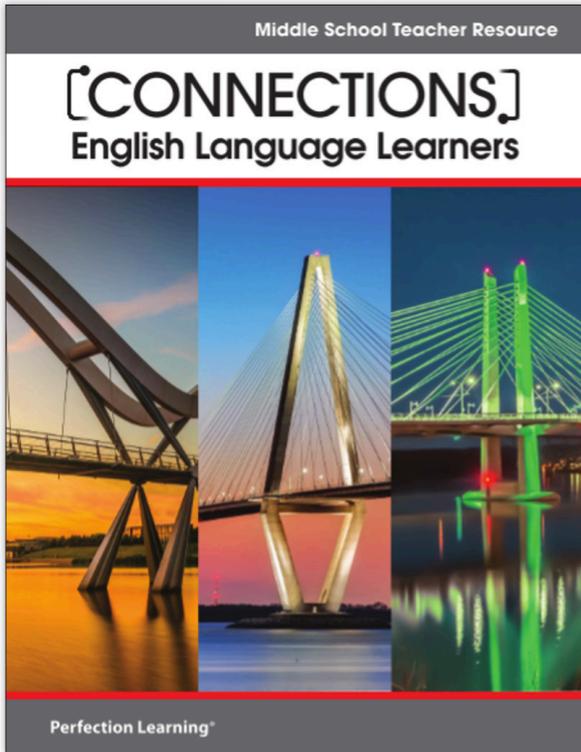
Figure 23: English Language Learners Teacher Resources are provided to help teachers understand and support ELLs in accessing the content with instructional modifications

Figure 24: Immersive Reader features provide scaffolds that students can choose to implement as they are reading text, such as text-to-speech, picture dictionary, and translation into over 100 languages

Engagement and motivation are essential to ELA development in middle and high school

Students generally become less interested in reading and writing as they transition from elementary to middle school, particularly if they have struggled with reading or writing in the past (Kelley & Deck-er, 2009; Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000). Motivation to read impacts how much students read, which has a direct impact on achievement in reading comprehension (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999), and students' confidence in their own writing abilities is strongly linked to their motivation to write and to their writing achievement (Pajares, 2003). Thus, providing ELA instruction that is both motivating (promoting a desire to learn) and engaging (promoting active learning) is key for middle and high school students. Self-determination theory posits that motivation is driven by three innate human needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence comes from feeling successful in an activity, autonomy comes from feeling in control of one's own behavior, and relatedness comes from feeling connected to other people (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Facilitating Engagement and Motivation with *Connections ELA*

To build a student's sense of competence, learning objectives should be clearly stated and closely aligned with performance expectations for students, with frequent monitoring of and feedback provided on student progress (Kamil, et al., 2008). *Connections: ELA* provides specific learning *Objectives* at the start of each lesson segment that are tightly aligned to items on the *Check Quizzes* available at the end of the lesson segment. The *Check Quizzes* are automatically scored, providing students with instant feedback about their performance in relation to the learning objectives. In addition, providing direct, explicit instruction with scaffolding to students can help them feel successful with challenging learning objectives and new concepts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). *Connections: ELA*'s close reading instructional routine uses gradual release of responsibility to support students with explicit, systematic, scaffolded instruction as they engage in productive struggle with texts, growing their capacity to engage and persevere in the development of higher-order cognitive skills (Snow & O'Connor, 2013).

To foster autonomy, students should be provided with opportunities for self-directed learning, such as allowing them to choose their own reading selections or topics for research and writing (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). At the end of each chapter, *On Your Own* helps students integrate ideas through suggested extension activities for self-directed learning; students are presented with multiple options for reading, listening, or viewing additional resources related to the chapter's close read text. *Connections: ELA* also offers *Project-Based Assessments* that include opportunities for students to select their own topics for writing, research, debate, and presentation. In addition, the Annotation Tools in the interactive edition of *Connections: ELA* allow students to annotate text, controlling the level of scaffolding provided to them while reading via accessibility, language, and vocabulary tools, and providing them with a sense of purpose and engagement while reading (Figure 25).
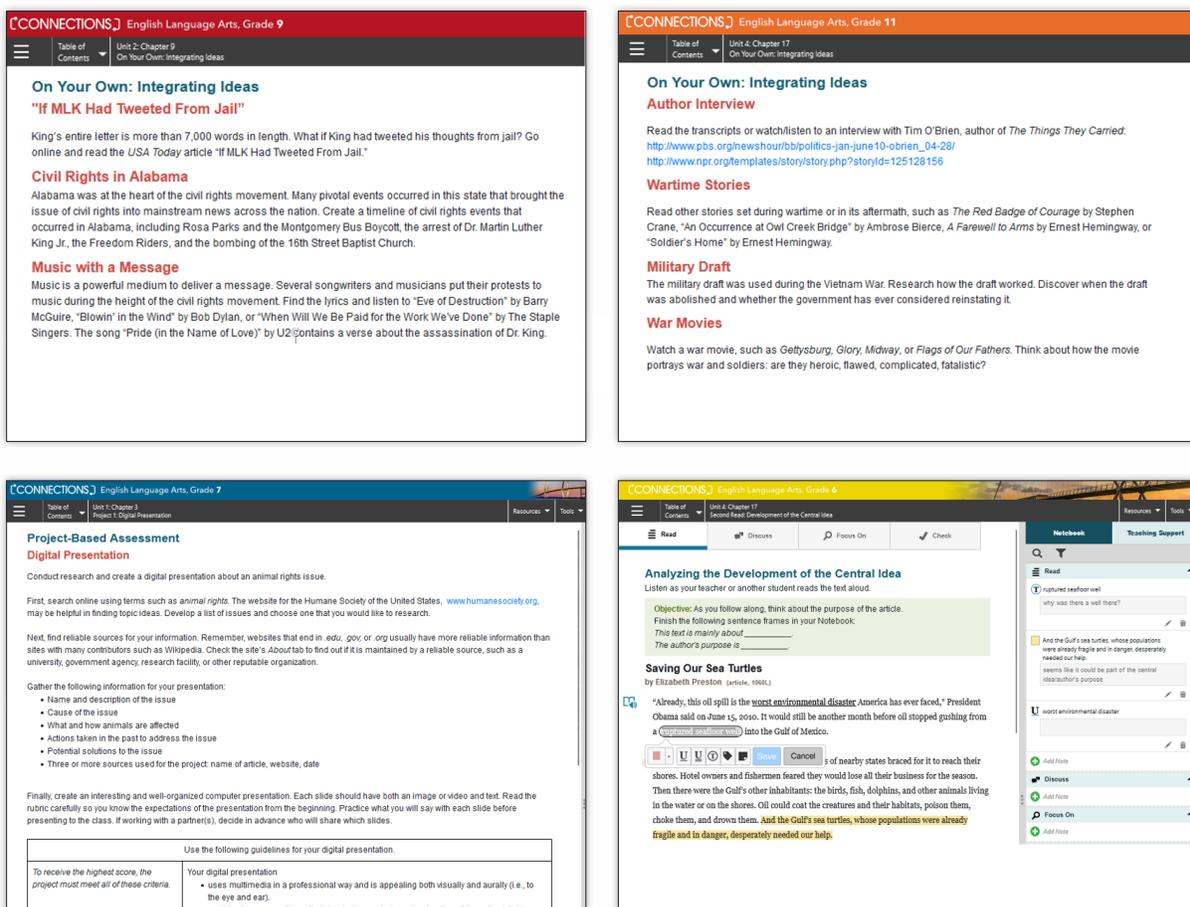
Figure 25: *On Your Own, Project-Based Assessments*, and Annotation Tools give students a sense of autonomy by allowing them to choose their reading and viewing selections, projects, and the level of scaffolding they need while reading

Students need to experience a sense of relatedness to feel motivated and engaged: they need to feel that their literacy experiences are relevant to their lives or to current events and to engage with their peers in collaborative learning activities (Kamil, et al., 2008). The text selections in *Connections: ELA* are organized by unit around thought-provoking *Essential Questions*, which encourage students to think about and make connections to the texts they read. Questions like "How are friendships built and broken?," "What strikes fear into the heart?," and "What informs your decisions?" target issues adolescents will be faced with as they learn and grow, and texts related to these topics make the reading relevant and meaningful to learners. Further, texts that accurately and respectfully depict a range of diverse racial, ethnic, and gender groups foster a sense of belonging and a better understanding of others (Armstrong, 2021). *Connections: ELA* texts include representation from a diverse set of authors, topics, characters, settings, and cultures so that students have an opportunity to see themselves and others in what they read. Finally, collaborative learning activities, such as guided discussions, promote relatedness, actively engage students in comprehending and analyzing the text, and provide additional opportunities for feedback when students respond to one another's comments. *Connections: ELA*'s close reading routine provides *Text-Based Discussion Questions* to foster group and partner conversations about the text; *Project-Based Assessments* include collaborative activities like a *Round-Table Discussion*; and online discussion questions are available as well through the Collaboration Wall, which allows students to view and respond to one another's answers to text-related prompts (Figure 26).
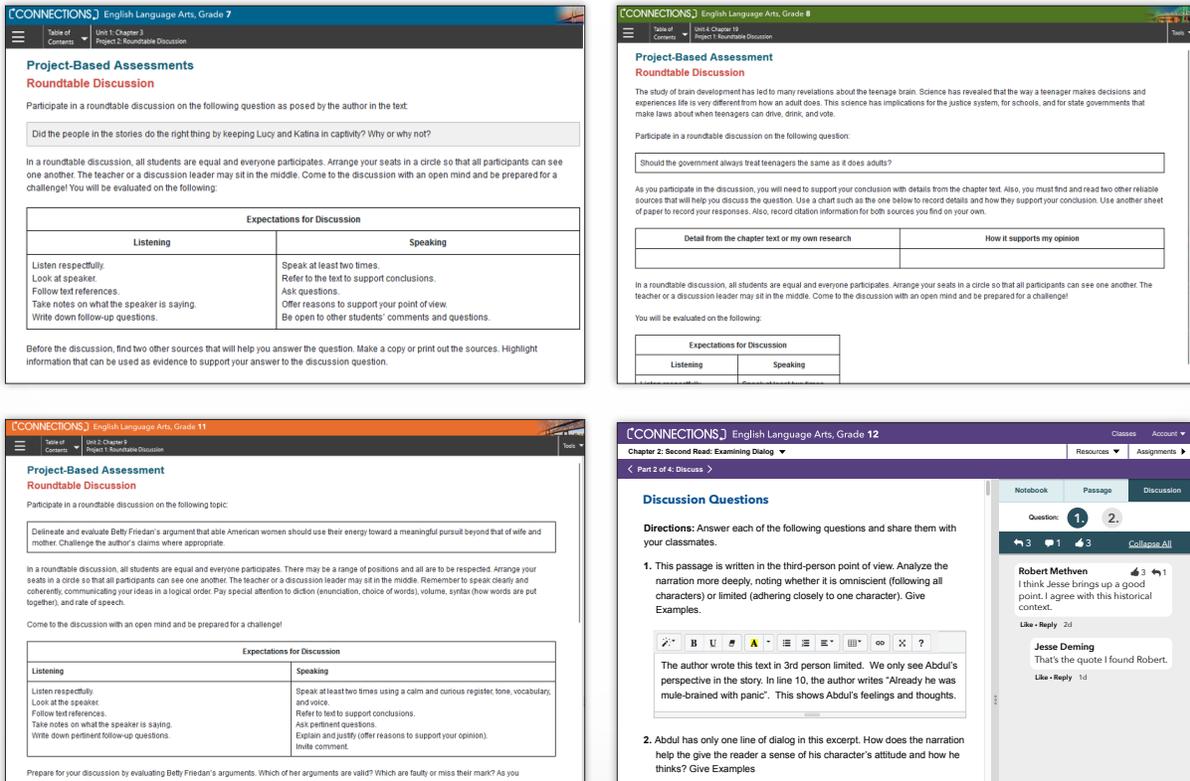
Figure 26: In-person and online discussions give students a chance to relate to one another, making instruction more personal and engaging

Connecting research and practice with *Connections: ELA*

Knowing that so many middle and high school students struggle as readers and writers, and understanding the short- and long-term consequences of poor reading and writing skills, educators, caregivers, and stakeholders have a duty to provide students with the best ELA instruction possible to ensure they develop the literacy skills they need to succeed and thrive in college, career, and life. The Science of Reading and the Learning Sciences offer research-based insight into how people learn in general, and how they develop language and literacy skills specifically. With explicit, systematic instruction in key literacy skills that is responsive to skill diversity, engagement, and motivation, students can develop the advanced language, literacy, and critical thinking skills that are the goals of middle and high school. The research-based instructional approaches found in *Connections: ELA* can propel students toward becoming thoughtful, independent readers, writers, and thinkers.

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