

# CORE KNOWLEDGE LANGUAGE ARTS

Notes on the Literacy Program  
from [www.coreknowledge.org/ckla](http://www.coreknowledge.org/ckla)

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See the entire curriculum at [www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum](http://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum)

Under Kindergarten, Grade 1, or Grade 2

# THE CORE KNOWLEDGE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM

- Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) is a comprehensive, preschool through fifth grade program for teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking while also building students' vocabulary and knowledge across essential domains in literature, global and American history, and the sciences. In the early grades, CKLA focuses on oral language development through carefully sequenced read-alouds as well as systematic instruction in reading and writing skills. In later grades, CKLA continues to advance students' knowledge and vocabulary through read-alouds and in-depth discussions while also immersing students in complex texts and advanced writing assignments that draw on the academic content they've been engaged in since preschool.
- CKLA K-3 is broken into two strands—a Skills strand and a Listening & Learning strand—so that children can master sounds and letters for fluent decoding and encoding during one part of the day and then have additional time to build the knowledge, language, and vocabulary that are essential for strong comprehension.



The Core Knowledge Language Arts Program is based on the insight that reading comprehension is a two-lock box, a box that requires two keys to open.

- The first key is decoding skills.
- The second key is oral language, vocabulary and background knowledge sufficient to understand what is decoded.

## First Key

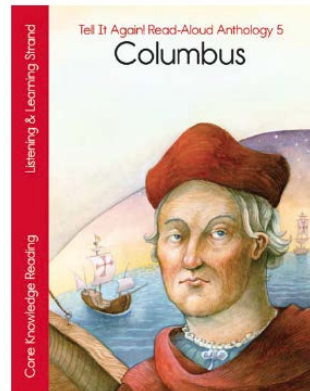
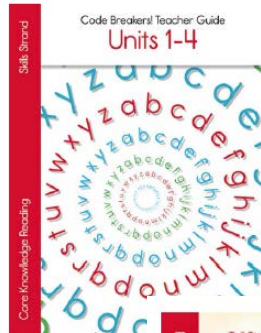


**Decoding Skills**

These are taught in the Skills Strand of Core Knowledge Language Arts

**Grades K-2:**

- Focus on systematic, explicit instruction in synthetic phonics
- Sound > letter instruction
- Reading and writing taught in tandem, as inverse procedures
- Repeated oral reading of 100% decodable text to build fluency



## Second Key



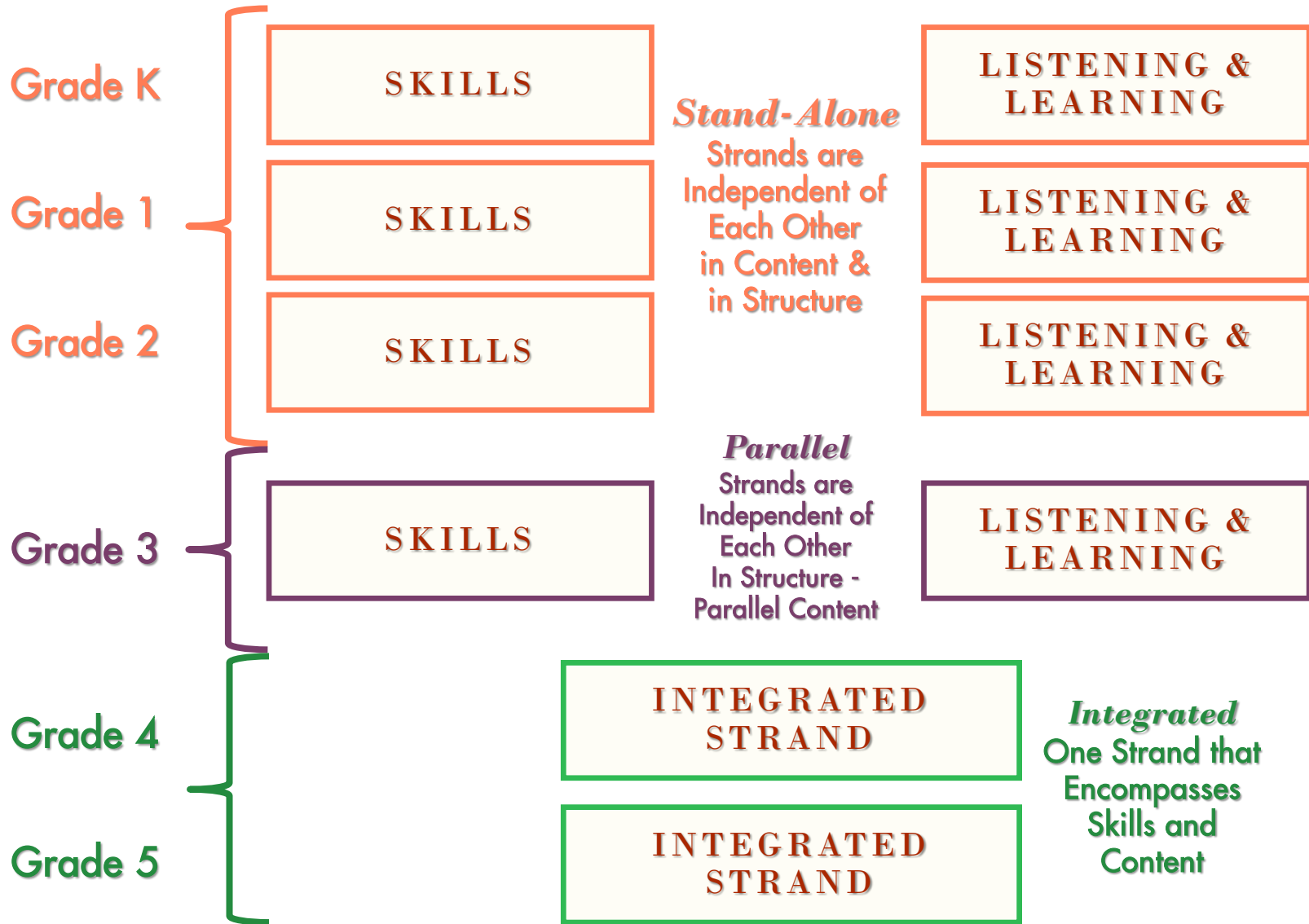
**Oral Language, Vocabulary, Background Knowledge**

These are taught in the Listening and Learning Strand of Core Knowledge Language Arts

**Grades K-2:**

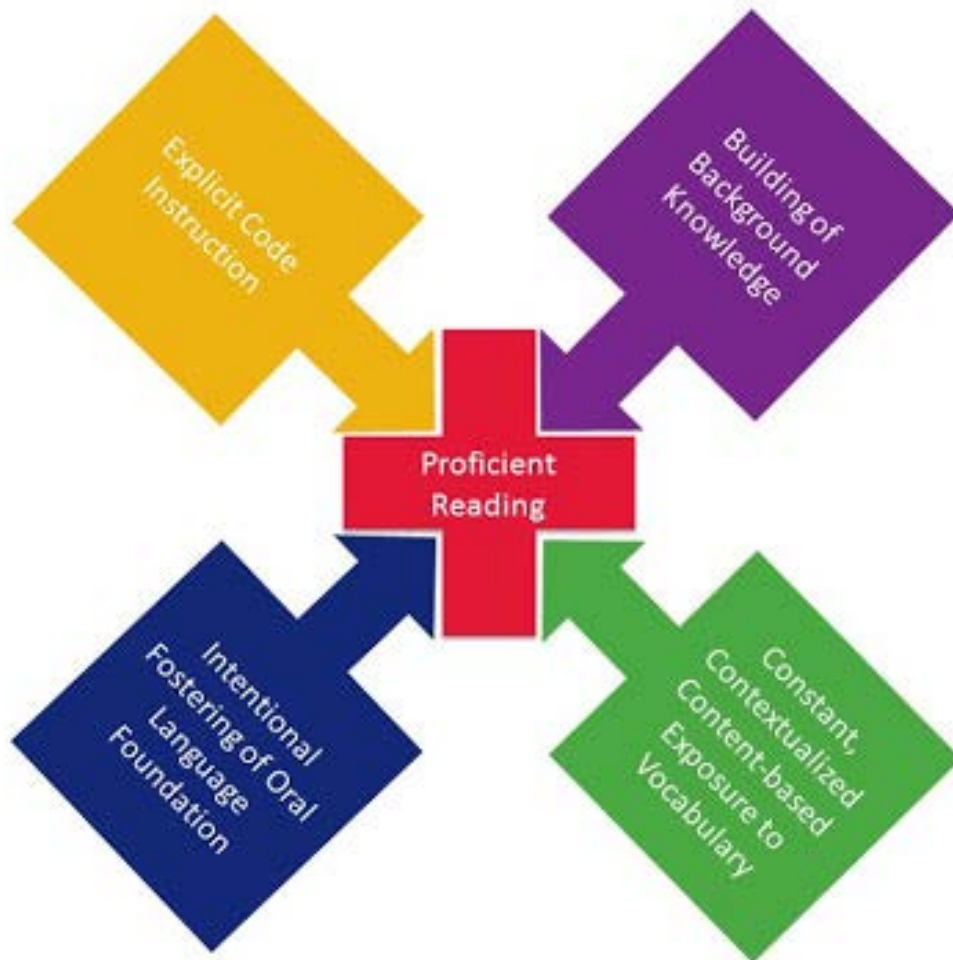
- Focus on listening comprehension
- Carefully sequenced oral read-alouds grouped into thematically unified domains, based on the *Core Knowledge Sequence*
- Read-alouds include fiction and nonfiction selections

# K-5 STRUCTURE



# **THEORIES BEHIND THE PROGRAM**

# DECODING & BROAD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE



The underlying philosophy is that effective ELA instruction revolves around meeting the needs of the students in ways that heed two essential findings from cognitive science: decoding (and encoding) must become automatic and fluent, and broad background knowledge and vocabulary are essential to comprehension.

# FOUR PRINCIPLES OF INSTRUCTION

To be child-centered and research-based, CKLA is designed around the following four principles of instruction:

- 1. *Explicit instruction in the code is necessary for automatic and effortless decoding.*** It is not enough to teach children to be familiar with letters and sounds. To create strong, fluent readers, instruction must help children read words automatically and effortlessly. Explicit instruction in, and extensive practice with, the spelling patterns of the English language is the only way that children can transition from learning to read (in which their mental energy is mostly focused on decoding) to reading to learn (in which, since decoding has become automatic, their mental energy can be devoted to comprehension of more complex texts and topics).
- 2. *Background knowledge is essential to strong comprehension.*** The ability to be a critical and strategic reader depends on having a wide breadth of knowledge and related vocabulary. Comprehension isn't a transferable skill that can be applied equally well to any text. While reading comprehension strategies are often helpful, the less the reader knows about the topic at hand, the less he or she will grasp.
- 3. *Vocabulary learning is most efficient when it is contextualized, content-based, and constant.*** There is nothing wrong with studying vocabulary lists—but the sheer number of words that children know clearly demonstrates that most vocabulary is learned in context, by hearing a word many times and thus having many contexts in which to guess at and infer meanings.
- 4. *The connection between oral and written language must be supported.*** Although children do transition from learning to read to reading to learn in elementary school, it is not until the end of middle school (on average) that students' reading comprehension is as strong as their listening comprehension. Even as children become strong readers and writers, there is a benefit to hearing and discussing complex texts that the teacher reads aloud. What is more, reading and writing are not all there is to English language arts—listening and speaking are important too. CKLA respects all aspects of language development, and is designed to ensure that children become competent in all modes of communication.



# THE READING COMPREHENSION EQUATION

$$R = D \times C$$

In this equation, each of the letters is a variable that stands for a specific skill:

**R** is a measure of reading comprehension ability.

**D** is a measure of decoding skills.

**C** is a measure of language comprehension ability as measured using a listening task.

The Core Knowledge Language Arts Program includes two strands of instruction, and these strands correspond with the elements of reading isolated in the simple view of reading. The Skills Strand is meant to build students' decoding skills (D), while the Listening and Learning Strand is meant to build students' language comprehension ability (C) by exposing them to vocabulary, concepts, and ideas through frequent reading aloud.



# SEPARATING DECODING FROM COMPREHENSION

“As a way of demonstrating the complexity involved in learning to read and write in English, suppose we attempted to list all of the discrete bits of information a person needs to know in order to be able to read and write in English. As a starting point, we might begin with the 26 letters and argue that these are the 26 things one really needs to learn to read and write English. However, for each letter, one eventually needs to learn not only the letter shape but also the letter name (in order to be able to read abbreviations and initials). So that is 52 bits of information. That is a good start, but we must not stop there. In English all letters can be written in uppercase and lowercase forms, and the uppercase forms are not always the same as the lowercase forms. Compare B to b, D to d, H to h, R to r, Q to q. At least 16 uppercase letters have a slightly different form than the matching lowercase letters. So we must raise our estimate of the complexity of the English writing system to 68 bits of information.

We are not done yet. Students must also know the 44 sounds these letters stand for. That raises our estimate of the complexity to 112. If there were a simple one-to-one relationship between letters and sounds, that might be a fairly good estimate of the complexity of the code. Unfortunately, the relationships between sounds and letters in English are quite complicated. The 44 sounds of English can be spelled many different ways. In our work on this program we have identified 150 spellings that are frequent enough to be worth teaching in the early grades. That boosts our estimate of the complexity of the code to 262.

In addition, students need to learn to track from left to right, to blend sounds into words (when reading), and segment words into sounds (when writing and spelling). They need to learn a handful of symbols used in writing, including the period, comma, exclamation point, question mark, quotation mark, and apostrophe. That raises our estimate of code complexity to about 270 bits of information. We could boost the estimate even higher by adding tricky words and unusual spellings or by pointing out that there are many letters in English that can be pronounced different ways. We could also point out that reading a word like thin requires the students to group the first two letters and attach them to one sound, and that reading a word like cake requires students to scan ahead, see the ‘e’, and realize that it controls the pronunciation of the ‘a’ earlier.

But even without these additions it is clear that the English writing system is quite complicated. On a conservative estimate, there are 270 bits of knowledge a person needs to be able to read and write English. It is unwise to ask students to tackle all of this complexity at once and hope that they will figure it out.”

# THE “SKILLS” STRAND

# “SKILLS” MATERIALS

## Teacher Guides

- The teacher guides outline the lessons. There is one teacher guide for each unit.
- There are 150 lessons in each grade.
- Each lesson begins with an Objectives header. This specifies the sounds, spellings, tricky words, and/or concepts that the students are expected to learn during the lesson. The focus here is generally on new letter-sound correspondences and new tricky words taught.
- The At a Glance Chart gives an overview of the lesson. This chart lists the name of each exercise in the lesson along with the materials needed to teach that exercise and the suggested time allotted to each exercise.

## Workbooks

- These ten books contain worksheets for students to complete as part of the lessons. There is one workbook for each unit. The worksheets are numbered consecutively so as to coincide with page numbers. The first worksheet is 1, the next is 3, then 5, and so on. When it is possible to include 100% decodable instructions, they are printed on the top of the worksheet. When it is not possible to do this, parent/teacher instructions are printed vertically along the left side. For take-home worksheets, the first item on each worksheet exercise has generally been done for the students, as a model. Each student should have a workbook.

## Readers

- These readers contain 100% decodable texts for students to read. There is a reader for each of the units listed, and new spellings taught in the unit are printed in bold throughout the reader to help students master new material. The last few stories in each reader are stories for the pausing point, which can be either assigned or skipped depending on the needs of the students in the class. Ideally, each student should have his or her own reader. Students can be allowed to take the books home for additional reading practice when the unit is completed.

# SAMPLE “SKILLS” LESSON

## GRADE 2, UNIT 4, LESSON 2

### Lesson 2

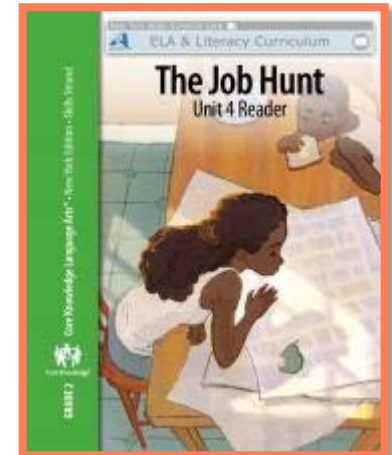
#### Spelling Alternatives

#### ✓ Objectives

The following language arts objectives are addressed in this lesson. Objectives aligning with the Common Core State Standards are noted with the corresponding standard in parentheses. Refer to the Alignment Chart for additional standards addressed in all lessons in this unit.

- ✓ Capitalize holidays, product names, and geographic names (L.2.2a)
- ✓ Read decodable text that incorporates the letter-sound correspondences taught with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension (RF.2.4)
- ✓ Read and understand decodable text that incorporates letter-sound correspondences taught, with purpose and understanding (RF.2.4a)
- ✓ Ask and answer questions (e.g., *who, what, where, when, why, how*), orally or in writing, requiring literal recall and understanding of the details and/or facts of a fiction text read independently (RL.2.1)
- ✓ Use information gained from the illustrations and words in “Morning” to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot (RL.2.7)

At a Glance	Exercise	Materials	Minutes
<b>Warm-Up</b>	Common and Proper Nouns		5
<b>The /er/ Sound and Its Spellings</b>	Today's Focus Spellings	previously prepared Spelling Tree leaves; Spelling Trees for /er/, /ae/, /a/, /ie/, /i/, /ue/, /u/, /oe/, /ee/, /e/, /aw/, /ow/	20
<b>Practice</b>	R-Controlled Vowels: Yes (Same) or No (Different)?	Worksheet 2.1	10
<b>Reading Time</b>	Whole Group: “Morning”	<i>The Job Hunt</i>	25
<b>Take-Home Material</b>	Mixed Review R-Controlled Vowels	Worksheet 2.2	*



The decodable Reader for Unit 4 is “The Job Hunt.” This fictional Reader describes a 19-year-old girl's search for a job in New York City with the help of her younger brother. The introduction contains information about New York City, including a map. The stories in the CKLA program are 100% decodable, meaning they are made up entirely of spellings and Tricky Words introduced or reviewed quickly in class during previous lessons.

# SAMPLE "SKILLS" LESSON

## GRADE 2, UNIT 4, LESSON 2

### Morning

It was morning. Kurt Gunter was in the kitchen with his big sister, Kim. Kurt placed some butter on his toast. Kim glanced at the paper and ate some toast.

Kurt was seven. His sister Kim was nineteen. She was home from college for the summer.

"What are you doing?" Kurt asked.

"I'm looking in today's paper at the Job Opening ads," Kim said.

"Why?"

"I need a summer job," Kim explained.

"Why do you need a job?"

"So I can make some cash."

#### Previewing the Spellings

- Preview the following spellings before reading today's story.

'er'	'ir'	'ur'	Other multi-syllable words
Gun   ter	shirt	Kurt	coll   ege
butt   er	first	burst	nine   teen
summ   er			o   pen   ing
pa   per			ex   plained
sis   ter			sub   way

#### Wrap-Up

- Use the following questions to guide your discussion about the story "Morning." Remember to encourage students to answer in complete sentences, and refer back to the story if they cannot recall the answer.

#### Discussion Questions on "Morning"

- Literal* Who is older, Kim or Kurt? (Kim is older.) How do you know? (Kim is nineteen and Kurt is seven.) Where has Kim been before summer time? (Kim has been attending college.)
- Literal* Why does Kim want to get a summer job? (She wants to earn money to save plus buy things she needs, like clothing and a bike.)

### Mixed Review R-Controlled Vowels

Dear Family Member,

Ask your child to read each sentence and the two word choices. Your child should write the best choice for each sentence in the blank.



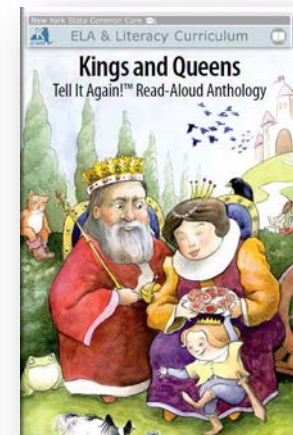
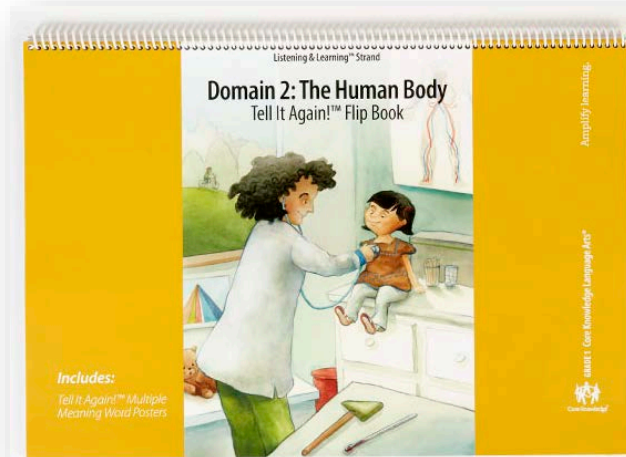
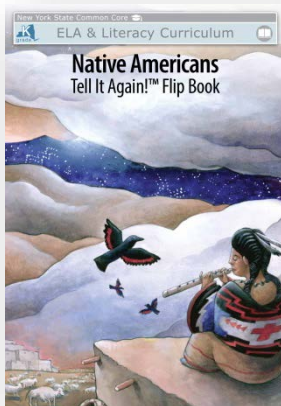
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Kim are job hunting.  
(Kurt    Corn)
- Jill would like to get three more \_\_\_\_\_.  
(skirts    swirls)
- A bird will \_\_\_\_\_ to its mom for food.  
(curb    chirp)

**THE  
“LISTENING & LEARNING”  
STRAND**

# THE “L & L” APPROACH

- ~ “Build on the research finding that students’ listening comprehension outpaces their reading comprehension throughout elementary school”
- ~ “Teacher read-alouds, class discussion, vocabulary work, and extension activities”
- ~ “Each domain is dedicated to a particular topic”

The Core Knowledge Language Arts Listening and Learning Strand is designed to help students build the background knowledge and vocabulary critical to listening and reading comprehension. The decoding skills needed for future independent reading are taught separately in the Core Knowledge Language Arts Skills Strand. The two strands complement each other, building the requisite decoding and comprehension skills that comprise fluent, mature reading. The teaching of the two strands, however, need not be correlated, i.e., teachers may provide instruction and practice in a given unit of the Skills Strand as needed, while moving on to new topics and anthologies in the Listening and Learning Strand.





# THE “L & L” DOMAINS

## Sequence of Domains in the *Core Knowledge Language Arts* P–2 Listening and Learning Strand

Preschool	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2
1. All About Me	1. Nursery Rhymes and Fables	1. Fables and Stories	1. Fairy Tales and Tall Tales
2. Families	2. The Five Senses	2. The Human Body	2. Early Asian Civilizations
3. Animals	3. Stories	3. Different Lands, Similar Stories	3. The Ancient Greek Civilization
4. Plants	4. Plants	4. Early World Civilizations	4. Greek Myths
5. Habitats	5. Farms	5. Early American Civilizations	5. The War of 1812
<b>Dispersed throughout the year:</b>	6. Native Americans	6. Astronomy	6. Cycles in Nature
• Classic Tales	7. Kings and Queens	7. The History of the Earth	7. Westward Expansion
• Important People in American History	8. Seasons and Weather	8. Animals and Habitats	8. Insects
	9. Columbus and the Pilgrims	9. Fairy Tales	9. The U.S. Civil War
	10. Colonial Towns and Townspeople	10. A New Nation	10. Human Body: Building Blocks and Nutrition
	11. Taking Care of the Earth	11. Frontier Explorers	11. Immigration
	12. Presidents and American Symbols		12. Fighting for a Cause

# RESOURCES

# SCOPES & SEQUENCES

## *Skills Scope & Sequence* K-2:

<https://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-1-ela-curriculum-map>

Each Skills lesson begins with a warm-up, reviewing previously taught content in reading, writing, and/or grammar. All reading times—denoted below as demonstration stories or whole group, small group, or partner reading—consist of a story preview, presentation, and discussion.

## *Listening & Learning* Scopes & Sequences:

Kindergarten: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/kindergarten-ela-curriculum-map>

Grade 1: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-1-ela-curriculum-map>

Grade 2: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/grade-2-ela-curriculum-map>

## Unit-by-unit Alignment of *Skills* Learning Objectives to the Common Core State Standards:

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/kindergarten-english-language-arts>

<https://www.engageny.org/resource/ckla-grade-1-unit-by-unit-ccss-alignment>

<https://www.engageny.org/resource/ckla-grade-2-unit-by-unit-ccss-alignment>

A sample Kindergarten *Listening and Learning* lesson annotated for the CCSS shifts:

[http://www.coreknowledge.org/mimik/mimik\\_uploads/documents/745/AnnotatedLesson\\_L&L\\_CKLA.pdf](http://www.coreknowledge.org/mimik/mimik_uploads/documents/745/AnnotatedLesson_L&L_CKLA.pdf)

# PURCHASING & LEARNING MORE

## Purchasing Materials:

<https://store.amplify.com/core-knowledge-language-arts-c34.aspx>

### *Skills:*

*Student workbooks*

*Student readers*

*Big books of readers (grades K-1 only)*

*Teachers' guides*

*Spelling cards*

### *Listening & Learning:*

*Domain Flip Books*



## Demonstrations by a Master Teacher:

Diane Tureski, a former New York City public schools reading coach who participated in the CKLA pilot program, leads you through a variety of K–3 lesson types in these demonstration videos.

- [Basic Code Lesson](#)
- [Tricky Spelling Lesson](#)
- [Tricky Words Lesson](#)
- [Spelling Alternatives Lesson](#)

# FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTIONS

# SMALL GROUPS

## **How are small groups incorporated into the K–3 Skills strand?**

*Small groups are incorporated flexibly and dynamically to support the needs of children on an ongoing and daily basis.*

Opportunities for small group work occur daily in the Skills strand. One recurring lesson activity that lends itself to small group instruction is the use of the Skills readers. The systematic nature of the Skills strand means that, once students have been properly placed for instructional purposes at the beginning of the year, students in a given classroom will read the same decodable text, with different levels of teacher scaffolding and support. Guidance is provided in the Skills Teacher Guides for each lesson so that the teacher may direct the most capable students to read either independently or with partners, as she or he works directly with a smaller group of students to provide guided reading instruction of the same decodable text. In addition, each reader includes a Pausing Point or supplemental stories/text so that faster, more capable readers have the opportunity to read additional stories. It should be noted that skills lessons intentionally plan and allocate time for re-reading of the same text on different days, so that if the teacher has devoted her attention to one group of students during the initial reading, she may refocus her attention on other students during the second reading. Differentiating the level of support provided to different students as they are reading allows the teacher to provide differential support to children as they engage in their grade-level text.

# WRITING

## How is writing taught in CKLA?

*Writing in multiple genres is taught through a process that builds from three highly scaffolded steps to seven flexible steps.*

In addition to explicit lessons in handwriting, spelling, and grammar, writing is taught throughout K–5. Instruction begins with a three-step writing process—plan, draft, and edit. The process is reinforced as each new writing genre is addressed. Each genre is taught through a gradual reduction in scaffolding over a 6-lesson duration that includes teacher modeling, group practice, independent practice, and independent application. This systematic approach allows for continued support and predictable learning as children progress in their knowledge of text types and complexity of writing. By grade 3, students have worked their way up to a five-step writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Beginning in grade 4, the CKLA writing process expands to seven components: planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, and editing (and the optional component of publishing). An important change between the writing process in grade 3 and grades 4 and 5 is that the writing process is no longer conceptualized as a series of scaffolded, linear steps that students follow in a set sequence. Rather, students move back and forth between components of the writing process in a flexible manner, similar to the process mature and experienced writers follow.

In addition to specific writing lessons, there are numerous writing opportunities for students throughout CKLA. Especially in grades 2–5, students regularly engage in writing short answers in response to text-based questions. In these writing opportunities, students focus on (1) the use of evidence from the text and (2) individual sentence construction.



# CLOSE READING

**Does CKLA support "close reading"?**

*Yes. Students engage in close reading beginning in second grade. Prior to second grade, the lessons emphasize text-based questions and discussions in both the Listening & Learning and Skills strands, as a way of preparing young children to successfully engage in close reading by second grade.*

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have placed increasing attention on the practice of close reading, including asking text-dependent questions that are worthy of students' time to answer. CKLA includes explicit instructions to guide teachers in using a close reading approach with particular excerpts from students' readers. These lessons focus students on the text itself and precisely what meanings can be derived from close examination of the text.

# SPELLING

**Are there spelling lists?**

*Yes. Beginning in first grade, the units within the Skills strand have spelling lists, as well as spelling practice infused in other activities. Prior to that there are lists of words that children write and learn.*

In CKLA, spelling is not taught as an isolated list of words each week, but as a continually reinforced skill. As such, writing and reading work together to reinforce specific spelling/letter patterns. For example, a unit at the end of K teaches the digraph “i\_e” for the sound /ie/. The writing work and spelling work in that unit will ask children to write words using this digraph, to write words from dictation (a traditional spelling test/activity), to answer story questions using words that would involve this spelling pattern, and to read stories that contain words that use this spelling pattern. Instruction in morphology and spelling continues through fifth grade.

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

## How does the program support students who are learning English?

*CKLA supports English learners (ELs) by providing a strong, comprehensive approach to English language arts instruction. The program's heavy emphasis on listening and speaking, as well as building knowledge and vocabulary, should be especially helpful to ELs.*

The design of CKLA is based on what educators and researchers have learned about good reading instruction. The Skills strand provides children systematic, explicit, and comprehensive instruction in the code of the English language. The sound-first approach in CKLA is particularly supportive of ELs, as it lets them focus first on the sounds in words and then make the translation to how that sound is represented in the English alphabet. Explicit grammar lessons are also a feature of the Skills strand, which is consistent with the best thinking about how to build the foundational language skills needed to learn a second language. Anecdotal evidence from teachers using the Skills materials with diverse students indicates that the Skills materials are accessible for all learners, including ELs.

The vocabulary work, multiple meanings work, guided listening supports, and text exposure within the Listening & Learning strand also are beneficial to ELs.

In addition, the *Supplemental Guides* for grades K–2 provide further support to educators seeking to meet the specific needs of ELs (as well as children with weak or lagging language skills). The *Supplemental Guides* adjust the pacing of instruction, provide more specific guidance on explicit instruction for Tier 2 (broadly academic) and Tier 3 (domain specific) vocabulary words, and offer deeper support for syntactic awareness. They also feature instructional tools for altering instruction in critical ways.

# LEVELED & INDEPENDENT READING

**What should we do with our leveled reading libraries after we adopt CKLA?**

*Schools are encouraged to maintain their leveled libraries and to invite children to select books from them to read in addition to their CKLA readers.*

Especially for children with limited access to books outside of school, these leveled libraries serve the critical purpose of giving children opportunities to pursue their interests through reading. However, the Common Core Standards and the latest research suggest that student-selected leveled readers are best used as supplements and that instructional time be devoted to ensuring that students become fluent, automatic decoders and to building knowledge and vocabulary.

One option is to add guided reading and accountable independent reading (GRAIR) to the school day or week. This is a time in addition to the instructional time for CKLA in which children's choice in reading (and perhaps writing) is promoted. It is a time to support children accessing volumes of texts aligned to their interests, at or slightly above their level, and for engaged reading (or writing). This option has the practical benefit that the GRAIR time can vary as needed from day to day or week to week.

*See the white paper by David Liben entitled "On Merging the Common Core State Standards into Existing Literacy Practices" for more on leveled, guided, and independent reading.*