

Tutorial

Applying CCSS to Literature



In this tutorial, I will guide you through how I apply the Common Core State Standards for Reading to a short story, “The Circuit” by Francisco Jiménez. It is one of the guided practice texts for Chapter 7: Reading Short Stories. Print out the text from the Resources CD. I recommend working through the text with a colleague, to foster diverse interpretations, but of course you can do it on your own as well. Since I will be thinking of the story as a whole, I won’t excerpt paragraphs as I do with the informational text. I suggest that you read the story more than once and refer to the text as you read my thinking about the story in relation to the standards. My thinking can serve as a model you can use to prepare your own think-aloud lessons for students to help them build their mental models of how to apply these reading standards to a variety of complex literature.

Standard 1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

This standard invites students to use plot details to show what the text says. This assesses students’ literal comprehension. Next, the standard asks students to make inferences using evidence from the text.

“The Circuit” is about a migrant family who moves from place to place in California looking for work. It opens at the end of strawberry season, and the family packs up their belongings in their car and moves to Fresno in search of work. The family finds work picking grapes and stays in a labor camp near Fresno. The narrator weeps at the thought of moving again.

Their new home is a garage with no windows, a roof peppered with holes, a dirt floor, and rickety walls eaten by termites. The narrator and his family work long hours in the hot sun with a short lunch break. Papa’s two school-aged boys hide when the school bus appears because Papa needs them to work in the fields and earn money. In November, the narrator can go to school. He meets Mr. Lema, his sixth grade teacher who helps him read the new words in the story the class is reading. Excited about learning to play the trumpet from Mr. Lema, the narrator returns home to tell his parents and finds the car packed ready to move again.

Using the fact that the work hours were long and the garage-home in poor condition, I inferred that migrant families endured hard work and terrible living conditions to earn a meager living. The fact that the family traveled to follow the crops enabled me to infer that growing up for the children was tough because they had no friends, and they were behind in school. Also,

not having a permanent home helped me infer that the family had few possessions, only those that fit in the car. When the narrator thinks, “I hated this move,” it’s possible to infer that he dreads moving again and the long hours of work. Whenever you model inferring, always include and explicitly point out text evidence, for that is the standard you want for your students.

TEACHING TIPS — STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS

Help students pinpoint the details in fiction that enable them to make inferences. Study the following:

- *what characters say, think, and do*
- *the decisions characters make and how they deal with problems and conflict*
- *settings and how these affect characters’ emotions, decisions, and reactions*
- *what other characters say and think*
- *speaker tags that tell a character’s tone of voice and/or the emotional state (e.g., John whined; Maria whimpered.)*

Standard 2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

To figure out the central idea or theme of a text, this standard asks readers to use specific details from the beginning to the end of the text. In addition, the standard calls for students to be able to summarize a text without editorializing or making personal comments on what happened. The framework, Somebody-Wanted-But-So (SWBS) is ideal for summarizing fiction (see pages 100–103 in the book for a sample lesson and the Resources CD for the form).

The plot details listed under Standard 1—the narrator’s sadness about moving again and the shock he experiences when he understands that there will be no trumpet lessons—supports this central idea of “The Circuit”: Life for migrant workers and their families is difficult because they are continually moving to find work and don’t have long-lasting relationships with others.

Using the Somebody-Wanted-But-So framework, here is an objective summary: the narrator is upset that his family is leaving their shack near the strawberry fields to move to Fresno to find work. In Fresno, the narrator works in the grape fields until the season is over; in November, he can begin school. He is nervous about being behind, but his kind teacher, Mr. Lema, helps him in reading during lunch hours. After a month in the new school, Mr. Lema offers to give him trumpet lessons as well. The narrator is thrilled and can’t wait to tell his parents—but when he arrives home, the family’s belongings are packed. They are moving again, leaving behind school and trumpet lessons.

Standard 3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

In a fictional work, characters change from the beginning to the end as they overcome obstacles and solve problems. This standard asks readers to understand plot episodes and story elements, evaluating how they interact to drive the plot and affect characters.

The first episode in “The Circuit” shows the narrator being unhappy about moving. The thought of it brings tears to the narrator’s eyes; when we read that he lays in bed and thinks “how much I hated this move,” it’s possible to infer that the family’s continual moving in search of work saddens and upsets the narrator. Yet, he shows courage and understanding of his parents when he keeps these feelings to himself. In the second episode, the family finds work in grape fields in Fresno. The narrator and his brother hide from the school bus so they can continue working in the vineyards. The family works under the hot, dry sun and buzzing insects. The author writes, “the hot dry dust made the afternoon seem to last forever.” These details let me infer that the work was exhausting and brought no satisfaction to the narrator. Change in the narrator occurs when he can attend school once grape-picking season is over. Even though he felt “dizzy” and “blood rush to his head” when asked to read, I can infer that narrator is pleased to be in school, especially when he points out that when his papa and brother left for work, he felt “relief.” Going to school, being on the bus, and joining other students in the sixth grade held the possibility of friends and learning. The narrator asks Mr. Lema, his teacher, to help him with the hard words, and Mr. Lema agrees. The narrator spends a month working with Mr. Lema, and we see his outlook has changed to optimistic and happy, especially when he thinks, “Mr Lema, my best friend at school.” The optimism and happiness reach a high point when the narrator can’t wait to tell his family about trumpet lessons. As soon as the narrator realizes that the family is moving again, it’s possible to infer that sadness replaces the happiness he felt.

Standard 4

Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

The focus on word choice can add to readers’ understanding of tone, character development, setting, and conflict. By inviting students to zoom in on connotative meanings of words and figurative language, the standard helps readers see the importance of word choice in a text as well as how words can support the central idea.

In “The Circuit,” when the narrator realizes that the family has packed their possessions and will leave the strawberry fields, he thinks, “I felt even more the weight of hours, days, weeks, and months of work.” The word *weight* reflects the narrator’s state of mind about continuing working in the fields from sun-up to sun-down; *weight* connotes a burden, a heaviness, a load that’s not possible to lighten. “Hours, days, weeks, months,” help me realize that this is an endless work pattern and returns me to the connotations of *weight*. The only break is traveling in the car to the next labor camp. The word *weight* connects me to tears and the thought “. . . how much I hated this move.” These words create a tone of sadness and hopelessness because the pattern of work seems endless. The sentence also links to the central idea that permanence, friendships, and relationships are not part of the migrant family’s life.

You can choose any sentence, chapter, or paragraph that spoke to you and then make connections. Offer students choice as well because this ensures that as they share, there will be diverse responses and interpretations.

Standard 5

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

This standard encourages a close reading of a specific sentence, a chapter, a scene in a drama or stanza in a poem in order to deepen readers’ comprehension of theme, the twists and turns of the plot, and setting.

The scene in which the family first views the garage in Fresno—the windowless garage with a dirt floor and leaky roof that will be their home—is telling. No one passes judgment or even comments on the poor conditions. This lets me know that they have become used to these kinds of living conditions. The description of the garage is a metaphor for the family’s life that has no window onto education, friendships, enjoyment, and the hope of changing the migrant cycle. It is a metaphor for the tears and weight the narrator feels and highlights the central idea of the difficulty of their daily lives.

In a short story, encourage students to choose a scene from the plot that they can use to show connections to setting and theme.

Standard 6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

This standard asks readers to understand the point of view of the narrator or speaker in literature. To accomplish this, it’s helpful for readers to study the narrator’s reactions to

episodes or plot, to conflict, to problems, to settings, to other characters, and to explore how the central theme links to narrator's point of view.

"The Circuit" is written entirely from the narrator's point of view. His reactions to moving from the strawberry fields to Fresno, his feelings about the endless days of work in the fields, and the fact that he never burdens his family with his thoughts and feelings all point to a narrator who loves his family but dislikes the migrant life.

Standard 7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

By asking students to compare and contrast a print text with a film, video, or audio version of the text, this standard asks students to cite differences in the texts and in their experience of the text.

Standard 8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Not applicable to literature.

Standard 9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

This standard invites readers to think across texts by comparing and contrasting two different genres that have similar themes or topics. This is a challenging task for students because the standard requires that readers have a deep understanding of the texts' central idea, themes, or topic in order to discuss how authors treat these in diverse genres.



Standards 7–9 encourage students to consider ideas from multiple texts in diverse formats. To facilitate thinking across texts, I have included multiple texts on a concept for each of the

genres discussed in the book, along with suggestions for further reading on the Resources CD. I encourage you to incorporate the Suggestions for Helping Students Think Across Texts and the Ideas for Inquiry and Problem Solving Beyond the Text sections included in each of Chapters 3–9.

Next steps include inviting students to compare and contrast what they learned about individual texts, look for commonalities, and cite and explain differences in the areas that follow:

- Common themes and ideas, including central idea
- Structure and point of view
- Writing craft and technique
- The language authors use
- Differences in structure, theme, and ideas