

## Applying CCSS to Informational Texts



In this tutorial, I will guide you through how I apply the Common Core State Standards for Reading to a complex informational text, an excerpt from Jim Murphy's *The Great Fire*, which is the anchor text for Chapter 3: Reading Informational Texts. 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. Start by reading the text to get the gist; then retell what you recall to make sure you remember specific details. If necessary, reread or skim to remember more specific details. Then read along as I think through the text using the Common Core State Standards.

### 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.

I'll begin by doing a close read of the first paragraph, determining what the text says explicitly, making logical inferences, and citing text details to support my thinking. The opening sentence—"Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn."—makes me wonder how Murphy will explain this dramatic statement. The next two sentences state that two-thirds of Chicago's 59,500 buildings were made of wood; knowing that wood is highly combustible leads me to infer that the abundance of wood was a contributing factor to the fire. Murphy goes on to explain that many buildings that had stone, marble, or copper exteriors were constructed on wooden frames, with wooden floors and flammable roofs. He uses the term "jerry-built," which I figure out means *flimsy* because he says the buildings "looked solid" and *looked* helps me understand that they only appeared to be solid. Many buildings were constructed of wood but made to look like stone or marble. I infer from these details that builders of Chicago's downtown area in 1871 wanted to make money and were willing to take shortcuts and deceive people. I can also infer that wood was available and cheap, so they used it everywhere without considering the possible consequences.

Share this kind of thinking with students through think-alouds, and provide them text-based questions that invite them to return to the text and use details to make logical inferences. Continued modeling combined with guided practice will, over time, help students move beyond mere recall of details to using details to infer.

## Standard 2

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

In the next three paragraphs, Murphy moves from describing the buildings in middle class and poorer sections to wealthier districts and in the fourth paragraph ties the details of both areas together. Taken together, the details in these paragraphs provide a wealth of evidence supporting Murphy's claim that Chicago was "a city ready to burn." Houses were crammed together and made of wood. Even the stone homes of wealthy citizens had wood interiors. Businesses were part of residential areas and all of them were highly combustible: paint factories, lumberyards, gasworks, mills, coal distributors, furniture manufacturers. Roads and sidewalks were made of wood in marshland areas—600 miles of wooden sidewalks and 55 miles of pine-block streets. These details support the central idea that in 1871 city planning was not part of the building of Chicago's downtown or its residential areas. That quick solutions to problems can place a city and its people in jeopardy is another central idea: *jerry-built* refers to flimsy buildings that are put up quickly, and the wooden sidewalks and streets were a "quick solution" to the mud on the marshlands.

When you model this kind of thinking for students, explain that the details in informational texts enable readers to pinpoint themes and central ideas.

## Standard 3

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

To meet this standard, students study the sequence of events, ideas, and information in the text and show the connections among them and how they interact to reinforce themes and central ideas. Murphy points out that fires were common in cities during the 1860's, enabling me to conclude that many cities, like Chicago, contained huge amounts of combustible material. Murphy provides historical data about fires in Chicago. In 1870, the year before the Great Fire, firefighting companies in Chicago responded to 600 alarms. The day before the Great Fire, a fire destroyed four blocks in the city and took more than sixteen hours to control. Murphy also shares information about weather conditions; in 1871, the summer was dry and hot with little significant rain. By placing this information after the description of how the city's buildings were construction, Murphy lays the groundwork for the start of the Great Fire in the last paragraph of the selection. Murphy helps readers infer that no one heeded these warnings—600 alarms, six fires a day by October, 1871—or made plans to deal with a large event. Readers clearly understand that the abundance of wood, the cramming of homes in all neighborhoods, and the combustible materials

in businesses combined with heat, lack of rain, and gusty winds all contributed to the Great Fire. The preponderance of evidence all supports the opening claim: “Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn.”

This type of analysis will most likely be new to your students. Show them how you link events and ideas in the text and how these interact in the text as Murphy builds his case by showing, paragraph upon paragraph, that Chicago was a city made of wood and other combustible materials. Point out how important it is to skim and reread parts to locate relevant details, and then discuss how the information and details all connect to the themes and central ideas.

### 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.

Now we’re moving into the Craft and Structure standards, which examine how the author developed the central ideas explored in the first three standards. Standard 4 focuses on language. I read through the selection and find words and phrases that support Murphy’s claim: “Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn,” words and phrases such as: *jerry-built, highly flammable tar, disguise, wooden framework, fast-burning wood, interspersed, roads and sidewalks out of wood, lumberyards, mills, paint factories, 600 alarms, six fires every day, unrelenting summer sun, unusually dry, steady wind, gusty, dried out, swirling wind, smoldered, a thousand yellow-orange fingers*. Reread these words and phrases and listen to how the language reinforces the ideas of drought, heat, wind, flammable materials, and reoccurring fires. The language continually reinforces the central idea that lack of city planning and greed made Chicago ready for a Great Fire.

When working on this standard with students, have pairs choose key words and phrases from their text, take turns saying them out loud, and listen for repeated ideas that relate to the central ideas and themes of the text.

### 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.

To analyze text structure, I recommend rereading the text specifically for this purpose, thinking about how the structure reinforces the central idea and other important themes. Consider whether your knowledge of structure asks you to adjust the central idea or elaborate and extend it.

Murphy opens this selection from *The Great Fire* with a thesis or position statement that

makes a claim about the fire that totally destroyed Chicago in 1871. Using argument and explanation to support his claim, Murphy builds his case by taking us into downtown Chicago and then into middle class, poor, and wealthy neighborhoods, enabling readers to visualize the city. He mentions the O'Learys and their wooden barn in the second paragraph, foreshadowing the burning of their barn that started the Great Fire.

By adding historical background on fires in other cities during this time and in Chicago and discussing the weather conditions, Murphy prepares readers for the last paragraph when the fire begins. The text structure supports the central idea that in 1871, Chicago was a city primed for a big fire.

Analyzing text structure has a double bonus for middle-school students; let them experience and understand both benefits:

1. It enables them to observe and understand how and why the author constructed a text, which can deepen their knowledge of how structure supports the central idea and other important themes.
2. The text becomes a mentor text, providing a model for constructing and supporting a claim.

As you think aloud and model several times, there will be a group who can work independently and students who require more scaffolds. By practicing analyzing text structures, students learn diverse ways to argue and explain central ideas and at the same time learn about the craft, technique, language, and organization that writers use in complex texts. Again, partnerships permit students to learn from and support one another. Partnerships are rehearsal for working independently which eventually will occur for all your students.

## Standard 6

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

Murphy's point of view is reflected in the claim he makes in the first sentence: "Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn." Opening this way immediately engages the reader because so many questions are raised: *Why was Chicago ready to burn? How did the Great Fire start? Could it have been prevented?* Since Murphy opens this section with a position statement, his purpose is to support it, building a case that explains why Chicago burned to the ground. All of the details included in this section, even the historical background on fires, focus on providing readers with an understanding of why Chicago was ready to burn in 1871.

Help students grasp that knowing the point of view and/or purpose of a topic determines how the author positions details and influences language choices and structure. When sharing your analysis of point of view and how it shapes a text, explain that standards 4, 5, and 6 work in concert to deepen readers' knowledge of the craft of writing.

Help students see that an in-depth knowledge of the details in a text acquired through

rereading can help them navigate the demands of each standard. It's no longer about "the text reminded me of a movie or something that happened," but it's about the text's information leading to logical inferences, themes, and central ideas.

### *Standards 7 to 9*

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
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.
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 set of standards encourages students to assimilate and evaluate information from multiple sources 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