One of the most controversial aspects of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects is its Appendix B (www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf), which contains the Common Core text exemplars. According to Publishers Weekly, Appendix B has been a “magnet for criticism” (Springen, 2012, p. 1). The exemplars represent a list of books (and other materials) arranged in grade-level bands for classroom use. According to Appendix B, “The text samples primarily serve to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are suggestive of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list” (p. 2).

Despite the clear wording that these books are not a recommended reading list, speculation abounds about the role the text exemplars will play in schools and classrooms. While the Standards mention a variety of text types in the grade-specific standards for K–12, they specify only a few required texts, including a Shakespearean play, a play by an American dramatist, and several historical founding documents. In spite of this, many librarians, teachers, and literacy experts fear that the text exemplars will become a new canon for literacy instruction, a kind of national reading list. As librarian Lindsay Cesari (2011) expressed in her blog: “How many schools will ignore that statement and use the exemplars (maybe due to lack of time?) as a foundation for their curriculum. It’s scary.”

Many districts have rushed to buy these titles, sometimes assuming these books may form the basis for test items that will ultimately appear on national assessments. According to Neumann (2012), “Given the way illustrative examples in Standards easily become part of the canon, it seems likely that the exemplars in the Common Core will quickly become fundamental to instruction, because teachers will expect them to appear on the exam” (p. 8). Publishers are already using the books as a template for what to include in their textbooks.

Where did these titles come from? According to the Standards (p. 2), the texts were chosen by a work group that took recommendations from teachers, educational leaders, and researchers who had used the titles successfully with children at the specified grade levels. These factors were considered in their choices:

- **Book Quality:** They selected “classic or historically significant texts as well as contemporary works of comparable literary merit, cultural significance, and rich content.” (p. 2)
- **Breadth:** They sought a broad range of complex, high-quality texts and considered publication dates, authorship, and subject matter.
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- Text Complexity: They also considered whether qualitative and quantitative measures demonstrated that the texts were sufficiently complex for the grade level.

In spite of this rationale, many educators are deeply concerned about the actual choices of titles for inclusion on the list. A chief complaint is that the creators of Appendix B eschewed contemporary and relevant texts, instead emphasizing canonical classics. A canon represents a body of works that expresses “cultural values and artistic excellence” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 26). Books that make up the canon are typically classic books—those that have stood the test of time, represent high quality, and contain universal truths. Classics can be both traditional and contemporary (Harris, quoted in McNair, 2010). Numerous criticisms have been leveled against the traditional canon of classics, largely because those works may lack appeal to children or young adults, address traditional themes that are viewed as outdated in today’s world, or don’t represent authors of color or topics that have a multicultural focus.

There is clearly some justification for the criticism that classics are overrepresented in Appendix B. Of the ten stories listed for grades four and five, for example, five are canonical classics: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1962), The Secret Garden (Burnett, 1985), The Black Stallion (Farley, 2008), The Little Prince (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000), and Tuck Everlasting (Babbitt, 1975). The stories listed for grades six through eight include Little Women (Alcott, 1989), The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (Twain, 2001), and A Wrinkle in Time (L’Engle, 1962), along with slightly more contemporary titles including Dragonwings (Yep, 1975) and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor, 1976). Poetry listed for grades six through eight includes many traditional works, including “Paul Revere’s Ride” (Longfellow, 1996), “O Captain! My Captain!” (Whitman, 2008), and “The Road Not Taken” (Frost, Cosgrove & Untermyer, 2002)

Choices like these have fueled much of the criticism of Appendix B. “I’ve always been dismayed by English language arts classrooms where students suffer through a list of moldy canonical literature. I really really hope the new standards and the exemplars don’t mean we’re going to give up all the progress we’ve made towards building a modern, relevant reading list in exchange for an outdated compilation of classics,” librarian Lindsay Cesari wrote in her blog (2011).

Another key criticism is the dearth of titles that address contemporary issues and were written specifically for middle school readers. Some young adult books have attained contemporary classic status but are not well represented in Appendix B. Connie Zitlow (2009), for example, identified 20 classic young adult novels. They include Hatchet (Paulsen, 1987), The Giver (Lowry, 1993), Holes (Sachar, 1998), The House on Mango Street (Cisneros, 1983), The Outsiders (Hinton, 1967), and Out of the Dust (Hesse, 1997). Each title clearly meets the criteria for quality literature, and many address contemporary issues that engage today’s readers. The only title on Zitlow’s list to make the text exemplar list was Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Taylor, 1976), which was published more than 30 years ago. Furthermore, recent Newbery Medal books, which represent the most important contribution to children’s literature in a given year, are noticeably absent. Newbery Medal books often become instant classics and “part of the canonical architecture of children’s literature” (Kidd, 2007, p. 100). They clearly meet the criteria for quality and have potential for engaging middle graders in ways that many classic titles cannot.

Many literacy educators, including me, applaud the increased emphasis on informational texts in the Common Core Standards. The mere fact that Appendix B includes text exemplars from this genre is a step forward, in my view. However, some of the choices on the list are surprising ones, and many of the titles are dated and out of print. One of the most important criteria for informational texts is that they be accurate and up-to-date (Moss & Loh, 2010), since information changes quickly in our society. As Kathleen Odean (quoted in Springen, 2012), a
former elementary school librarian notes, “With so many great, timely nonfiction books available, it’s disappointing that a dated 1992 book on Mars makes the list.”

Despite these problems, even a cursory glance at the grades six through eight informational titles demonstrates that respected informational text writers are represented. Jim Murphy, Jan Greenberg, Sandra Jordan, Elizabeth Partridge, Russell Freedman, and David Macaulay are just a few informational text authors who every teacher should know and every student should experience.

Another criticism of Appendix B relates to representation of multicultural books and authors. On the American Indians in Children’s Literature website, Debbie Reese (2012) makes an impassioned plea that teachers not read aloud the text exemplar *Little House in the Big Woods* (Wilder, 2007), noting those passages that malign Native Americans. Furthermore, she argues that Native American children will not see other, more positive portrayals of themselves, since none of the other books in the K–1 list were written by or portray Native Americans. Clearly, however, some effort has been made to provide books by authors of color and titles with multicultural themes. On the grades six through eight list, for example, authors include Nikki Giovanni, Virginia Hamilton, Laurence Yep, Gary Soto, Sandra Cisneros, and Pablo Neruda.

One of the most egregious weaknesses of Appendix B is that many recommended titles don’t match existing state curriculum standards. This problem was noted repeatedly by teachers in my graduate classes and appears to be a problem across grade levels. It is clearly an issue in the content area of history/social science, where historical text exemplar grade-level recommendations don’t correspond with grade-level history/social science standards. For example, Patrick Henry’s “Speech to the Second Virginia Convention” is listed for grades nine and ten, when in most states this document would be logically addressed in eighth-grade American history.

Should the text exemplars become the new canon? I don’t think so, for many of the reasons noted above. So, what value does Appendix B have for schools and classrooms? First, the list does contain examples of quality literature and provides teachers with an idea of the level of text complexity students will be expected to master at different grade-level bands. Second, exposure to some of the classic works included in the text exemplars can contribute to student understanding of our literary heritage. Moreover, Appendix B gives suggestions for books representing a range of genres, some of which are neglected in today’s classrooms. By specifying titles in seldom-taught genres such as literary nonfiction and informational texts, the Common Core elevates these genres to more prominence and helps ensure that they get more attention in classrooms. Furthermore, by including works written by quality authors of these genres, students and teachers are introduced to authors who are worth knowing and titles that are worth reading. The recommendations of informational titles in content areas such as history/social science, mathematics, and science and technical subjects may prompt content area teachers who stick to the book to explore other reading materials, including primary source documents, online articles, and others.

Most important, the text exemplars provide a starting point rather than the ending point for instructional planning. The *Common Core Curriculum Maps: English Language Arts Grades 6–8* (Common Core, 2012) contain sample Standards-based units that incorporate text exemplars, contemporary titles, music, film, media, and art to create rich learning opportunities. For example, one sixth-grade unit is entitled “Folklore: A Blast from the Past.” Students read picturebook versions of folktales, Rosemary Sutcliff’s (2005) *Black Ships before Troy: The Story of the Iliad*, a text exemplar, contemporary books from Rick Riordan’s popular Lightning Thief series, and nonfiction books about the Greeks, Romans, and Vikings; they’re also directed to compare ancient art from different cultures. Students dramatize scenes from the myths and legends they read and then write their own.
Through units like these, students get more nuanced learning experiences than those afforded by simply reading a particular text exemplar. They explore a topic in depth by reading different genres, comparing and contrasting texts, and engaging in a variety of literacy experiences that go beyond traditional tasks. Through these learning experiences, students gain much more than they would through isolated reading experiences focused on a single book, whether a text exemplar or not. As Jane Yolen (1987) notes, “Stories lean on stories, art on art” (xi–xii). By using the text exemplars effectively, teachers can help students see the connections among literary works of many kinds, creating rich and varied learning experiences for all students.

References
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Rick Chambers Is 2013 CEL Exemplary Leader

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