



ACT National Curriculum Survey[®] 2012

English Language Arts

ACT is an independent, nonprofit organization that provides assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education and workforce development. Each year we serve millions of people in high schools, colleges, professional organizations, businesses, and government agencies, nationally and internationally. Though designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose—helping people achieve education and workplace success.

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Introduction

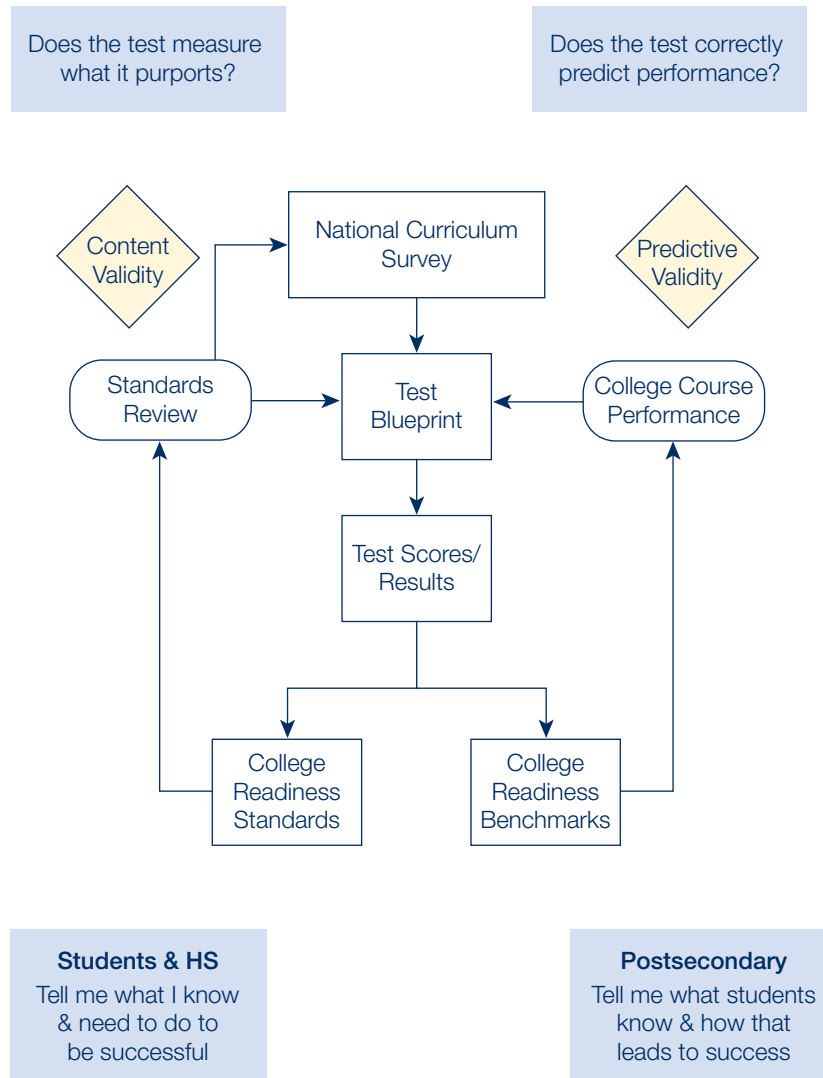
Every three to five years, the ACT National Curriculum Survey® asks educators about what they teach (or don't teach) in their courses and how important they feel various topics in their discipline are for students to know to be successful in these courses and in future coursework. The survey also asks educators for their opinions on educational topics of current interest, such as the college readiness of their students or the implementation of improved standards, such as ACT's College Readiness Standards or the Common Core State Standards.

Prior National Curriculum Survey efforts included educators from middle school through the postsecondary level; for the first time, the National Curriculum Survey 2012 also included elementary school teachers. ACT knows that early learning is important for later high school performance—not only do we have the assessment data to prove it, but we now also have survey data about its importance from the very people who teach it.

The Purpose of the Survey

The National Curriculum Survey is a critical step in the process used to build and regularly update a valid suite of ACT assessments that is empirically aligned to college readiness standards. The survey helps to inform the test blueprint for the assessments (see Figure 1). Results from the assessments are used to validate ACT's College Readiness Standards as well as the College Readiness Benchmarks. (The figure represents only this validation cycle, and does not represent how the Standards and Benchmarks were derived.)

Figure 1: The Science of ACT Assessments



ACT is committed to validity research. The first type is research into content validity, designed to answer the critical question: Does the test measure what it purports to measure? Essentially, this involves the validation of ACT’s College Readiness Standards, which are built on a foundation of years of empirical data and continually validated through the National Curriculum Survey as well as frequent external standards reviews. The second type of research, into predictive validity, is equally important. Using actual course performance, we answer a second critical question: Does the test correctly predict performance? Constant monitoring allows ACT to ensure that the answer to both of the aforementioned questions is yes.

This science behind our assessments—the evidence base and ongoing research—is critical to answering the key question of what matters most in college and career readiness. The National Curriculum Survey represents ACT's commitment to:

- use evidence and research to develop and validate our standards, assessments, and benchmarks;
- maintain a robust research agenda to report on key educational metrics (*The Condition of College & Career Readiness*, *Enrollment Management Trends Report*, and *The Reality of College Readiness*); and
- develop assessments, reports, and interventions that will help individuals navigate their personal path to success along a kindergarten-through-career continuum.

Accordingly, the following principles have shaped and will continue to drive our development agenda:

1. Maximize instructional time.
2. Establish reasonable testing times.
3. Provide transparent connections between ACT's College Readiness Standards and the Common Core State Standards.
4. Leverage technology to enhance student engagement, produce more meaningful results, and share results in a timely fashion.
5. Increase the emphasis on evidence-centered design, implementing as quickly as possible given technological advances (such as artificial intelligence scoring).
6. Include science as a critical content area in our assessment batteries.
7. Reflect the reality that there are multiple dimensions of readiness and success (validated by research).

As a nonprofit educational research organization, we will use these principles to drive the development and continuous improvement of ACT's current and future solutions, as well as the research agenda associated with them, thereby enabling ACT to fulfill its mission of helping all individuals achieve success.

The Survey Results

ACT makes the results of each National Curriculum Survey public in recognition that ACT's data can help educational stakeholders make more informed decisions about college readiness standards and about the alignment of those standards with assessment and curricula. (Survey results for the ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012 are available at <http://www.act.org/research-policy/national-curriculum-survey>.)

The present report highlights findings from the two English language arts portions of the survey: English/Writing and Reading. Participants in the English/Writing portion included teachers of English/language arts in elementary school and middle school; teachers of high school English/language arts, writing/composition, and literature courses; instructors of developmental writing at the introductory college level; and instructors of credit-bearing first-year college courses in composition, composition/rhetoric, and English.

The Reading portion surveyed educators in both language arts and social studies. The language arts group included teachers of elementary school English/language arts; teachers of literature and reading in middle school and high school; instructors of developmental reading at the introductory college level; and instructors of credit-bearing first-year college literature courses. The social studies group included teachers of US history and civics/government courses in high school, and instructors of credit-bearing first-year college courses in American government and politics, US history, and world history.

The implications of the survey findings are as follows:

- In their focus on literary content knowledge, high school literature and reading courses may not be well aligned with college expectations. In addition, some reading assignments across the high school curriculum may be somewhat less demanding than comparable assignments at the college level.
- For the most part, the writing modes considered important in high school writing assignments are well aligned with college expectations. However, across the curriculum, high school students may not be given enough longer writing assignments to fully prepare them for the demands of college writing.
- Although the research projects assigned in high school have intrinsic value, the frequency with which they are typically assigned may overstate their overall importance in the college curriculum.

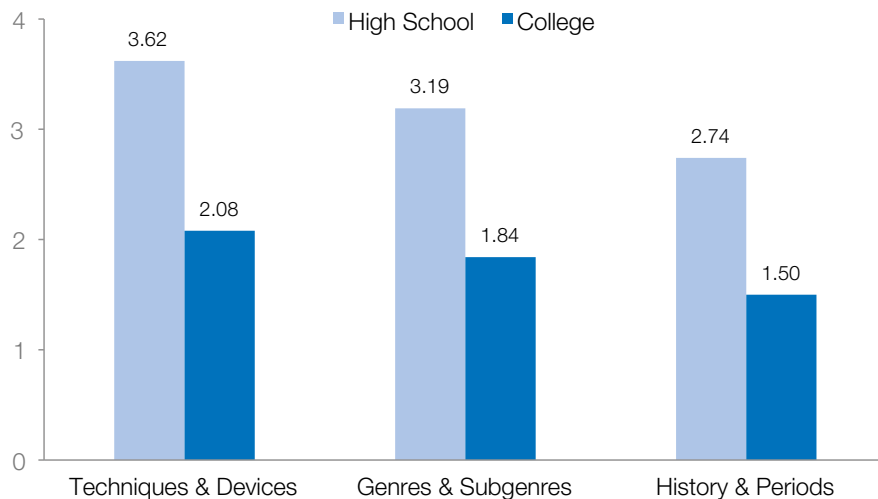
In the next section of the report, the findings leading to these implications are described in detail. The final section of the report offers recommendations suggested by the findings and implications, while the Appendix contains detailed information about the survey sampling process.

Findings In English Language Arts

Finding 1: Teachers of high school literature and reading courses tend to place more importance on literary content knowledge than do instructors of typical credit-bearing first-year literature courses in college.

Based on their survey responses, high school literature and reading teachers place a good deal of importance on topics requiring knowledge of content such as literary techniques and devices, literary genres and subgenres, and literary history and periods. However, such literary content knowledge is rated as substantially less important by instructors of first-year college literature courses. Figure 2 presents the averages of the importance ratings the two groups of educators assigned to the three topics in the survey that deal with knowledge of such content.

Figure 2: Average Importance Ratings for Topics in Literary Content Knowledge¹



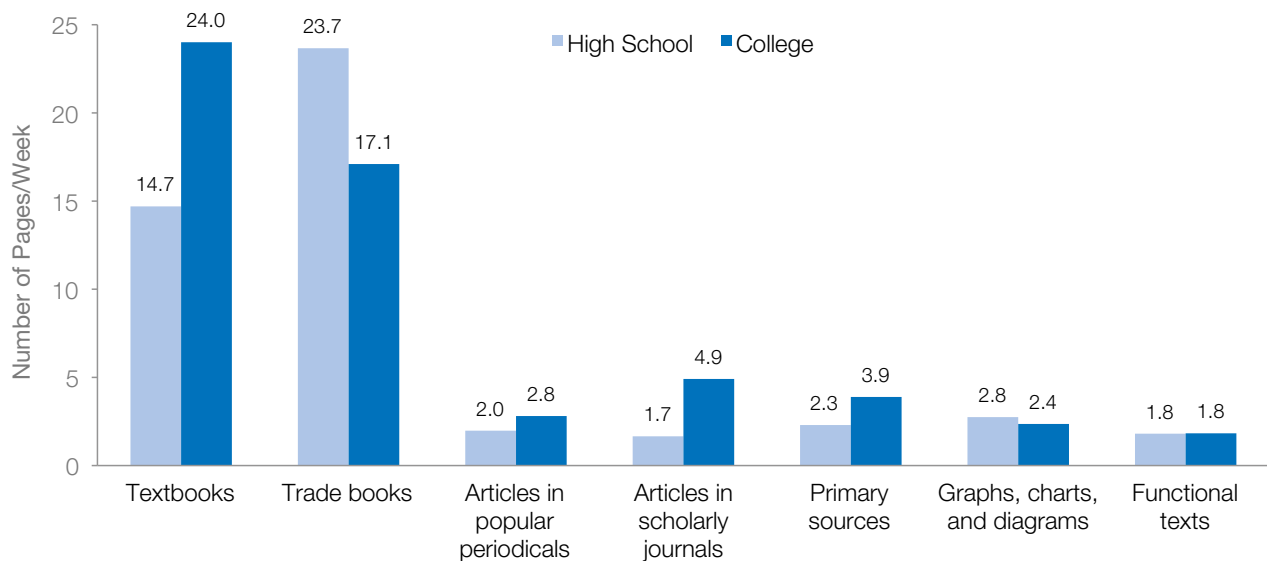
¹ Importance ratings in the survey were labeled as follows: 0=Not Important, 1=Low Importance, 4=High Importance.

Finding 2: Across subject areas, the amount of assigned reading tends both to increase and to become more demanding from high school to college—but perhaps not as much as is generally assumed.

To get an idea of how reading loads compare between high school and college, we asked high school teachers and instructors of credit-bearing college courses in all subject areas covered by the National Curriculum Survey 2012 (not just English language arts) to estimate the numbers of pages of reading they assign in a typical week in each of seven text categories.² The results are shown in Figure 3.

In terms of the change in the demands of assigned reading between high school and college, the picture that emerges is of a substantial increase in textbook reading and a nearly comparable decrease in trade book reading. In addition, the amount of required reading of scholarly articles and primary sources also increases notably in college. But most other reading quantities stayed relatively the same, and taken together, the data indicate that only about eight additional pages of reading per week are typically required in these first-year credit-bearing college courses compared to the typical reading load in the corresponding high school courses (roughly 57 pages weekly in college vs. about 49 in high school).

Figure 3: High School and College Educators’ Responses to the Question, “In a typical week, how many pages do you ask students in your course to read of each of these types of materials?”



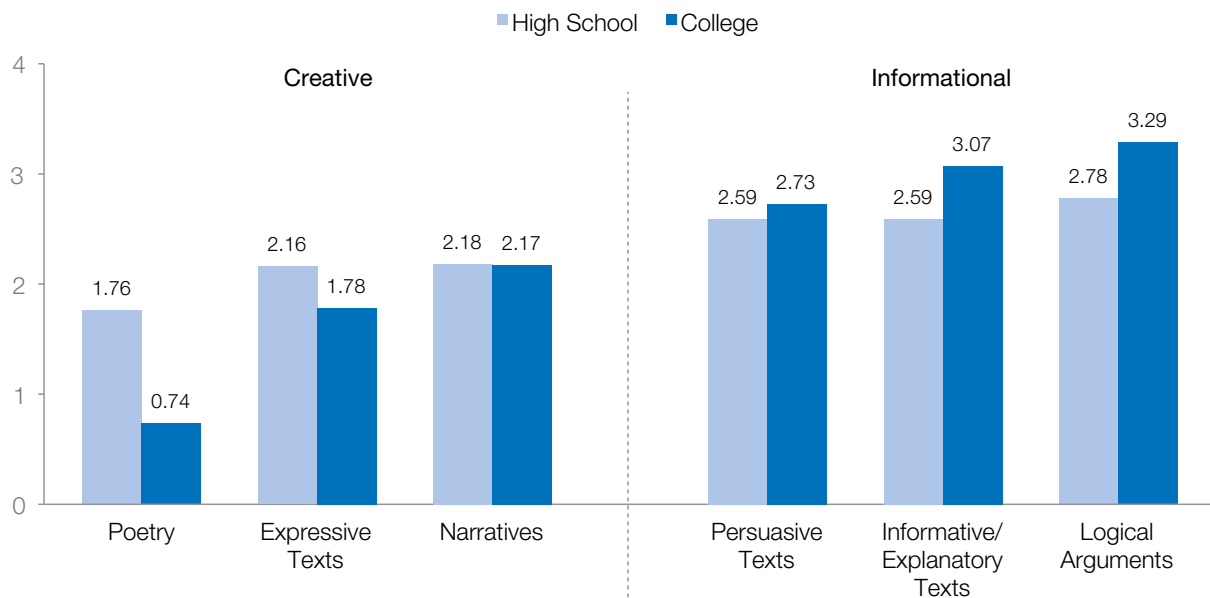
² Average results from all subject areas were summed and statistically adjusted to account for the relative representation of various types of courses within each subject area.

Finding 3: Teachers of high school English/language arts, writing/composition, and literature courses rate the importance of particular modes of writing similarly to instructors of credit-bearing first-year college composition, composition/rhetoric, and English courses.

High school language arts teachers and college language arts instructors rate the importance of six modes of student writing in virtually identical sequence (Figure 4). Further, both groups of educators rate the three “informational” modes (persuasive texts, informative/explanatory texts, and logical arguments) as more important overall than the three “creative” modes (poetry, expressive texts such as journal entries, and narratives).

However, a notable difference between the two groups of educators is that the high school teachers place relatively more importance on poetry and expressive writing, and relatively less importance on informative/explanatory writing and logical argument, than do the college instructors. This may be due in part to the emphasis in many high school language arts courses on providing students with the opportunity to write in a variety of modes, not just to prepare students for college writing assignments but also to expose them to the various ways in which writing can inform and enrich their lives.

Figure 4: Average Importance Ratings for Six Categories of Student Writing

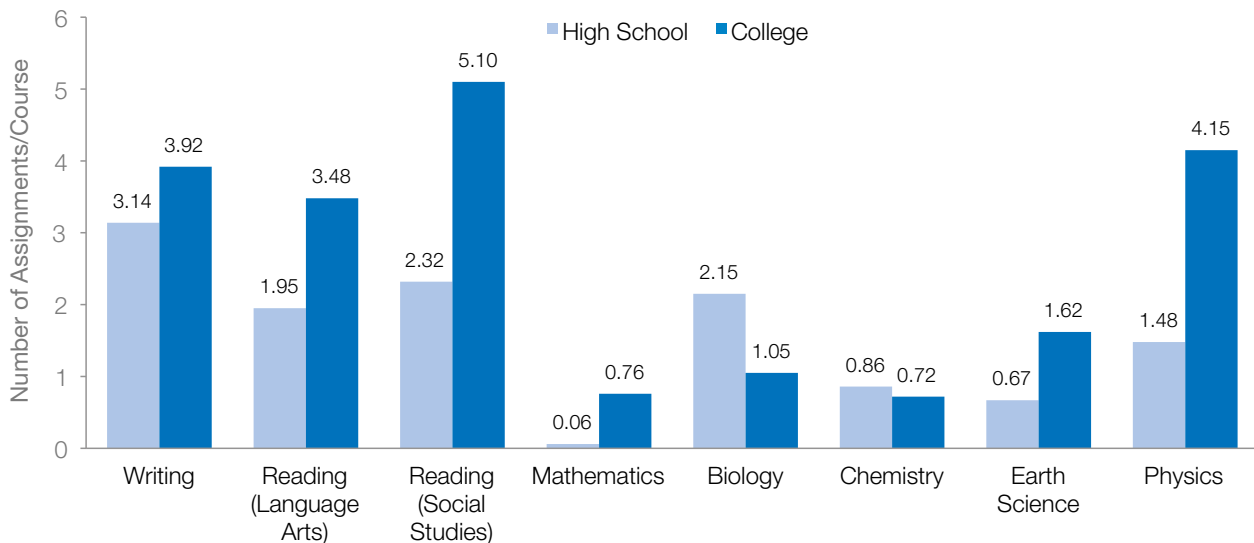


Finding 4: Across subject areas, writing assignments longer than five pages are generally given more frequently by college instructors than by high school teachers.

In the aggregate, high school teachers reported assigning relatively few writing tasks longer than five pages, with most of these longer assignments occurring in English language arts, social studies, and biology (Figure 5). Further, that some of the high school averages are below 1 indicates that in these high school subject areas, especially mathematics, students are almost never asked to write at length.

By contrast, the figure shows that instructors of credit-bearing first-year college courses reported assigning longer writing tasks with greater average frequency in most subject areas than did the high school teachers. (This contrast may be even more pronounced given that the college courses are typically about half as long as the high school courses.) The most dramatic increases are seen in social studies, physics, reading, and Earth science, but even the very small average in college mathematics represents a more than twelvefold increase over the high school average. Overall, these results suggest that some first-year college students may be encountering long writing assignments for the first time in their academic careers.

Figure 5: Average Numbers of Long Writing Assignments (> 5 Pages) Assigned in Various High School and College Courses, by Course Subject Area



Finding 5: Across subject areas, high school teachers almost always reported assigning more research projects than did college instructors.

According to the survey data, high school teachers are, in almost all cases, assigning more research projects, both short (a week in duration or less) and sustained (more than a week in duration), than are instructors of credit-bearing first-year college courses in the corresponding subject areas. Figure 6 shows the average numbers of short research projects by subject area for both educational levels, while the averages for sustained research projects are given in Figure 7.

Figure 6: Average Numbers of Short Research Projects Assigned in Various High School and College Courses, by Course Subject Area

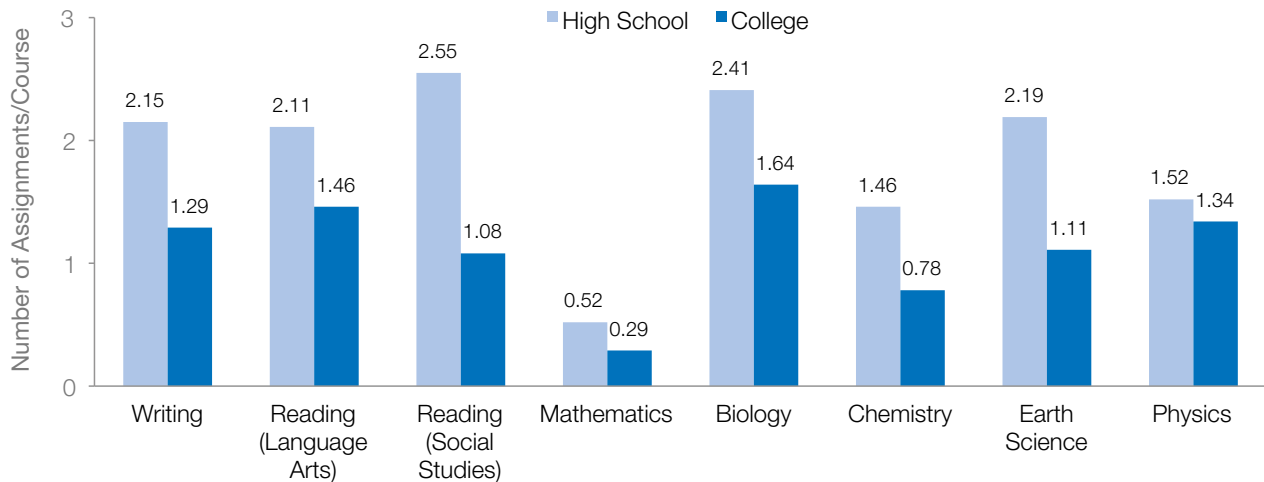
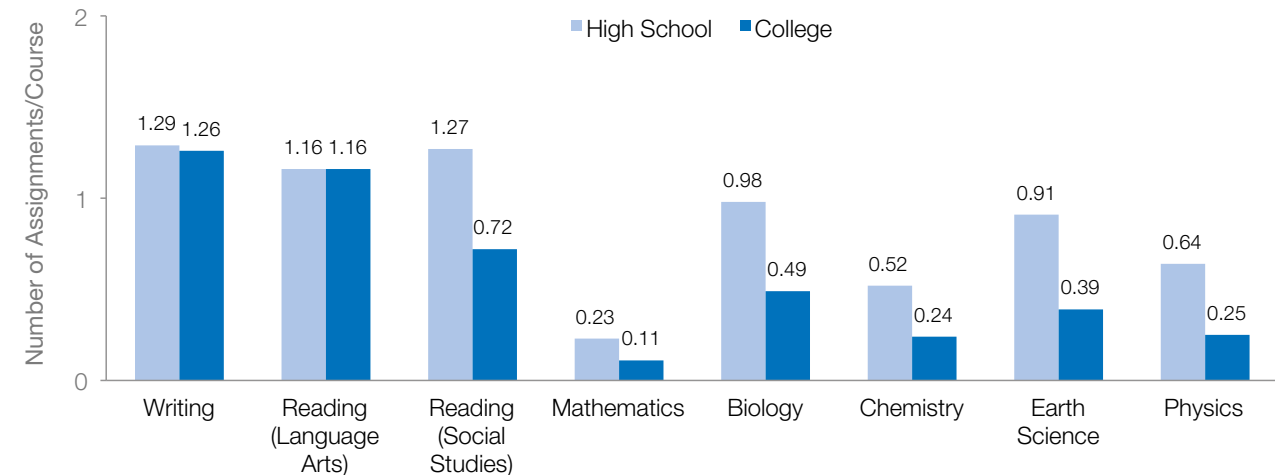


Figure 7: Average Numbers of Sustained Research Projects Assigned in Various High School and College Courses, by Course Subject Area



What might explain such a difference? It is possible that high school teachers are taking advantage of longer course lengths to assign more research projects (short projects especially). It may also be the case that credit-bearing first-year college courses rely more on the lecture format and less on the kinds of “hands-on” work that research projects typically involve.

Recommendations

Misalignments revealed by the National Curriculum Survey 2012 between high school and college English language arts course content or course requirements—as well as, in some cases, the writing or reading requirements of high school courses outside the English language arts curricula—likely influence high school graduates’ readiness for postsecondary education. However, the mission of high school English language arts courses can justifiably be seen as broader than just preparing students for college coursework.

Therefore, ACT sees these misalignments as an opportunity for high school teachers to examine and potentially adjust their practices in ways that help students maximize their ability to find the keys to college and career success without sacrificing other goals and benefits of high school English and literature courses (such as exposing students to a wide variety of writing modes and tasks) or of the high school curriculum generally (such as engaging students in projects that give them hands-on experience with research tools and methods).

Keeping this concern in mind, and in light of the preceding results from the National Curriculum Survey 2012 in English language arts, ACT offers the following recommendations to help in the pursuit of college and career readiness for all students:

- 1. High school literature and reading courses should focus on a more varied range of texts, including literary nonfiction, a genre of prose that uses narrative literary techniques usually associated with fiction or poetry to document and describe real-world subjects.**

High school instructors generally placed greater emphasis in the survey on literary content knowledge than did instructors of first-year credit-bearing college courses, which may perhaps be more geared toward the informational writing and reading demands of much college work outside of English language arts. Rather than eliminate the analytical techniques inherent to the study of literary content knowledge in high school, high school teachers could bring these techniques to bear on a wider range of texts important to a variety of disciplines and careers, fostering critical engagement and highlighting the broad importance of reading comprehension skills in general.

Because literary nonfiction texts are often used in first-year college writing courses as well, an increased focus on literary nonfiction in high school would also provide greater continuity across the transition between high school and college coursework, potentially providing students with a greater degree of confidence in their ability to meet the expectations of college reading.

2. High school writing instruction should emphasize the creative component inherent in persuasive and informational writing, while still exposing students to the expressive benefits of learning to write fiction and poetry.

Survey results show that high school writing instruction may focus somewhat more on fictional or expressive modes than on other, more persuasive or argument-based modes considered essential to college writing. Here again, rather than abandon the focus on creative modes, high school teachers can perhaps employ this focus in broader ways that encourage exploring the “creative” side of informational writing instead of treating it as solely technical or scholarly.

The move toward incorporating a greater degree of nonfiction reading mentioned in the previous recommendation may also play a role here, by acquainting younger readers with examples of the use of creative modes in informational texts at an earlier age, and help build students’ confidence in their ability to replicate this kind of writing as they are called upon to do so.

Appendix: Description of Survey Sample and Process

The ACT National Curriculum Survey is a one-of-a-kind nationwide survey of educational practices and expectations conducted by ACT approximately every three years. ACT surveys thousands of teachers and college instructors in English/writing, mathematics, reading, and science for the purpose of determining what skills and knowledge are currently being taught at each grade level—and which are considered essential for college readiness. The survey also asks educators for their opinions on educational topics of current interest.

For the ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012, we sent surveys by postal mail and e-mail to a nationally representative sample of elementary school, middle school, high school, and college instructors who teach courses in English/writing, mathematics, reading (including English language arts and social studies), and science (including Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Earth/Space Science) in public and private institutions across the United States. We also included a sample of instructors of developmental (i.e., remedial) college courses in English/writing, mathematics, and reading. We included these instructors because they should be uniquely qualified to identify the critical skills and knowledge that high school graduates are typically missing and the set of knowledge and skills that, when emphasized, result in student readiness for success in entry-level college courses. Table 1 gives the numbers of survey participants at each educational level.

Table 1: ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012 Participants

Educational Level	Number of Participants
Elementary school	1,052
Middle school	1,806
High school	2,943
College developmental	540
College	3,596
TOTAL	9,937

The numbers of participants listed in Table 1 compare favorably to those from past surveys. Excluding elementary school teachers, who are new to the survey, the total number of participants in 2012 is 16 percent higher than the number who participated in 2009, and 35 percent higher than the number who participated in 2005–06.

ACT uses the results from the main body of the ACT National Curriculum Survey to guide the test development of ACT’s college readiness assessments. ACT conducts this portion of the survey to ensure that its assessments are measuring the current knowledge and skills that instructors of credit-bearing first-year college courses identify as important for success in each content area. As in past years, the results of this section affirm that the knowledge and skills that are important for readiness and success in college and in workforce training, and the relative emphasis accorded to each, are reflected in the content of ACT Explore®, ACT Plan®, and the ACT® college readiness assessment.

All participants surveyed were asked to perform two primary tasks with respect to course content. First, they were asked to rate discrete content knowledge and skills with respect to how important each is to student success in the content area. (Specifically, high school teachers and college developmental instructors were asked to rate the importance of each content or skill in a given class they teach, while instructors of credit-bearing college courses were asked to rate the importance of each content or skill as a prerequisite to success in a given class they teach.) Second, they were asked to rank groups of content and skills, known as strands, with respect to their relative importance to student readiness for college.

We also asked the K–12 teachers to indicate whether or not they teach a particular content or skill and, if so, whether they teach it as a standard part of their course or as part of a review of material that should have been learned earlier. Finally, we asked all educators a number of questions about, e.g., the amount and type of reading and writing they assign; the textbooks they use; their awareness of the Common Core State Standards and of their state’s, school’s, or district’s alignment

efforts across K–13; their students' readiness for particular kinds of coursework; and their students' degrees of reading comprehension, computer literacy, and computer access.

Because some content areas were surveyed in larger numbers than others, the values displayed in educational-level totals were averaged across English/language arts, mathematics, and science. This ensured that, in these results, no one content area would have more influence than another.

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