

It's the argument, stupid, not the text

BY VALERIE STRAUSS, February 26, 2013



One of the [big points of contention](#) over the Common Core involves how much fiction vs. nonfiction high school students should be reading. This was written by Gerald Graff, professor of English and Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He was president of the Modern Language Association of America in 2008, and is the author, with Cathy Birkenstein, of “[‘They Say / I Say’: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing](#)’.

(This is the second of three pieces I am posting this morning on Common Core.)

By Gerald Graff

A [big quarrel continues to rage](#) over the kind of reading material that’s been mandated for language arts instruction by the new Common Core State Standards, but from my point of view as an English teacher it badly misses the point. The quarrel was touched off when the standards, which are scheduled to go into effect in K-12 schools in 2014, proposed a shift of emphasis in school reading assessment from works of fictional literature to “informational” texts. As [The Washington Post recently reported](#), many educators are reacting with outrage to the proposed shift, charging that, as Sheridan Blau, a professor quoted in the Post story puts it, “The effect of the new standards is to drive literature out of the English classroom.” First of all, not true. As past president Carol Jago of the National Council of Teachers of English pointed out [in a piece on The Answer Sheet](#), the new standards do urge increased emphasis on “informational” texts as opposed to literary fiction, but literature remains very much at the center of the school curriculum.

Even more important, though, the standards’ new emphasis on “informational” texts can only *benefit* the study of literature, since it is “informational” writing, after all, that we ask students to produce when they write classroom essays about literature, and how to write such essays—literary analysis—has always profoundly confused students.

After all, students who study Homer’s “Iliad” are not asked to write another epic poem about the work, but rather an “informational” essay in which they are supposed to analyze the epic and make some kind of argument about it. If you haven’t learned to write that kind of argumentative essay and you aren’t sure even what it looks like—and most American students are in that position—then it won’t matter much whether the text you write your bad essay about is fictional or factual.

In short, this debate about what books students should study is a distraction, since the problem for the vast majority of American students has always been not any particular *type* of book, but books and book discussion as such, regardless who gets to draw up the book list. Most of my college students, for example, will write an equally weak paper for me whether it's on Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" or George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language." If you haven't learned how to articulate an argument and you don't have a model of such argument in front of you, you'll write lousy argumentative papers (and speak poorly in class) about both the fictional and the "informational" text.

Here The Common Core State Standards, far from being a threat to the study of literature, actually figure to help that enterprise since what they highlight is the need to teach students to write (and orally communicate) arguments about literature as well as other subjects. Admittedly, I'm biased on this point, since the standards quote me in asserting that students need to learn "to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to college and career readiness."

In shifting our attention from what students should read to how they talk and write about what they read, the Common Core Standards are letting some overdue clarity into an educational debate that's otherwise deeply confused.
