

Common Core Standards

Problems with Literacy Standard 2.4 (for grade 2)

by Siegfried Engelmann

Another outrageous example of *Common Core Standards* for grade 2 is Literature Reading Standard 2.4. When you read the standard below, don't think of the top kids in a second-grade classroom. Think of the lower performers.

2.4 Describe how words and phrases (e.g. regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.

The first issue is what the authors think a phrase is and how a phrase is related to beats, alliteration, rhymes, or repeated lines. A **phrase** is a *group of words* used as a single part of speech. So you have noun phrases (John's hands) verb phrases (helping others), adverbial phrases, prepositional phrases etc.

Are there unique rules for phrases in poetry or song lyrics? Not really, just some colorful examples.

Grammatically the e.g. in the standard is supposed to provide examples of "words and phrases," (or "phrases") but *regular beats* and *repeated lines* are not examples of words or phrases. Perhaps the authors were trying to say something like this:

Describe how regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, and repeated lines supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.

Or this:

Identify words and phrases that supply rhythm and meaning in a story , poem, or song.

Either modified standard would make sense. The current standard, however, is "phrased" in a way that tries to redefine "words and phrases." The e.g. may make 2.4 the Gordian knot of bad standards.

If the standard was for fifth grade, we would have no trouble finding great examples of what the standard struggles to say. Consider the first part of *Sea*

Fever by John Masefield. It has words and phrases that could meet all conditions of the crippled standard.

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.

Great stuff--everything from personification and alliteration to repeated parts, elegant imagery, and captivating phrases (the sea's face). Its problem and the problem with the standard is that they are not appropriate for grade 2.

Another serious problem with the standard is that it requires students to "*Describe* how words and phrases...supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song."

What does this mean? The requirement is supposed to hold for both words and phrases. *Describing the meaning of words in a story* involves telling what the word means, but most words in a story *supply meaning* simply by being in the story. What's to describe already?

As the question illustrates, a sentence can be written so it tells about the speaker. But for teaching second graders, we would be in a far simpler universe of information. We would work on what rhymes in a poem or song. We would present different patterns and have students identify the "loud syllables" and the "soft syllables." Later we would present patterns with flaws and direct students identify the flaw and tell us how to fix the problem—adding another soft syllable, removing a group of syllables, replacing a word because it doesn't rhyme with its mate, etc.....

For stories, we would provide periodic passages with different moods, some of which are expressed in short sentences, partial sentences, or repeated sentences. We would call attention to these patterns.

At last Sarah stood up straight and said, "We...we made it!"

Students would indicate why she didn't simply say, "We made it." They would also indicate how the sentence gave clues about how she was feeling.

A conservative prediction about standard 2.4 is that there will be **very low reliability in what both teachers and students learn about retelling**. An “average” retell will be judged from superior to unacceptable by different judges. Judges won’t agree because they won’t have the same notion of what constitutes an acceptable response.

The main reason is that describing how regular beats, alliteration, rhymes and repeated lines supply “meaning” is difficult for many adults. Therefore the standard will prove to be a disaster by promoting discussions that teach students very little beyond how hard it is to understand what the teacher is trying to say. (Or an outfit like Smarter Balance will have a formula that is workable in grade 2 but that does not come close to actually meeting the standard.)

In summary, the standard, as written, is an embarrassment and should be in the waste basket (or the digital equivalent) in any grade.