

SREB



Getting Students Ready for College and Careers:

Transitional Senior English

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Regional
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Foreword

The cost is high for all of us when high school graduates are not prepared for the demands of college and the workplace. Students take longer to complete studies necessary to enter the professional workforce. Employers have to provide additional training to get new hires ready to contribute to their organizations' effectiveness. Postsecondary institutions fund dozens of non-degree credit courses with low student-to-teacher ratios to remediate reading and writing skills. In fall 2000, 11 percent of all entering freshmen took a noncredit reading course and 14 percent enrolled in a noncredit writing course. Students at public two-year institutions are even more likely to need remedial courses, enrolling in rates twice as high as all entering freshman.

We believe that the percentage of students who have to take remedial reading or writing courses in college can be cut in half if high schools target those students who have not mastered the most essential literacy skills. The solution is simple: Determine at the end of grade 11 who needs extra help and design a senior year English course that provides focused instruction to improve those targeted skills.

The process begins with higher education and public schools clearly defining readiness standards and related school assessments. Based on those standards, state departments of education can work with college faculty to design a senior English course that targets essential expository reading and writing skills. The next step is to prepare teachers to deliver the courses by providing summer institutes, online support and coaching. The course may even be offered in a Web-based format.

This report describes the promising results of a three-year pilot project to help students improve their literacy preparation for postsecondary studies and careers. It illustrates one approach to this important task.

If we want to meet the SREB *Challenge to Lead* goal of preparing more high school graduates for success in postsecondary education and careers, we must urge secondary and postsecondary school and teacher leaders to work together and use the senior year to help students master essential reading and writing skills.



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Introduction

The message is grim: ACT Inc. reports that only one-half of American high school graduates have the reading and writing skills to succeed in postsecondary education and/or the workplace.¹ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that the percentage of 12th-graders scoring at the Proficient level in reading dropped from 40 percent to 35 percent from 1992 to 2005, despite the fact that 68 percent of seniors completed a standard curriculum.² Organizations such as the Alliance for Excellent Education, ACT Inc. and the National Governors Association emphasize the need for high schools to do a better job of helping students gain vital communication skills by the time they graduate.

In 2002 the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) committed to 12 *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education designed to establish the 16 SREB states as national leaders in educational progress. One goal specifically addresses preparing high school students for responsible adulthood: *All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for postsecondary education and a career.*

Visits to hundreds of *High Schools That Work* (HSTW) classrooms during the past 20 years have revealed that students, teachers and administrators often are unclear about the literacy knowledge and skills students need in order to pass college courses and advance in a good job.

While states have language arts standards, ***by and large they have failed to benchmark language arts and reading standards to college and career readiness or to set reading standards for each content area.*** Educators need reading standards that: 1) pinpoint the literacy skills that high school graduates need and that all teachers should emphasize in all high school classes; and 2) help leaders and teachers plan and implement an English/language arts curriculum to prepare seniors for college and careers.

This publication is the result of a three-year project to help schools close knowledge and skills gaps of seniors who may be meeting graduation requirements but are unprepared to succeed in college-level courses and careers. The project was designed using these guiding principles:

- Student achievement will not improve significantly if standards are lowered. The purpose of a targeted senior-year course is to help students achieve readiness at the levels required by credit-bearing college courses and high-wage, high-skill jobs.
- Teachers must maintain a laser-like focus on helping students master essential skills through aligning instruction and assessment.
- Materials and activities must be authentic, i.e., related to students' interests, their lives and the real world.

During the project, seven high schools enrolled a total of 409 students in the Transitional Senior English course. Each student completed a college placement pre- and post-assessment in reading. ***By the end of the course, 63 percent of the students met reading readiness standards, compared with 46 percent initially. Eighty-five percent met writing readiness standards, compared with 75 percent initially.***

This report contains specific recommendations to help schools develop a Transitional Senior English course to engage students in completing rigorous reading and writing assignments aligned to high standards. It is not intended to answer all curriculum-related questions or to serve as a complete course design. Instead, it can assist schools in preparing students to meet the reading and writing demands of college and careers. The indicators, learning activities and sample assessment items will help high schools align the entire English/language arts curriculum to college- and career-readiness standards.

¹ *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading.* ACT Inc., 2006.

² *The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005.* National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

Why Develop and Implement Literacy Readiness Indicators for College and Career Readiness?

American teenagers are setting higher goals for themselves than ever before, but they often fail to reach these lofty targets. A recent Florida State University study showed that 50 percent of all high school graduates planned to get an advanced degree, compared with 26 percent in 1976. But the percentage of high school graduates between ages 25 and 30 who earned advanced degrees has not changed.³

While many students continue their studies after high school, a number of these graduates need remedial help in college. In fall 2000, 28 percent of entering college freshmen enrolled in at least one remedial or developmental course. Eleven percent of all entering freshmen took a noncredit reading course, while 14 percent enrolled in a noncredit writing course. Students at public two-year institutions were even more likely to enroll in remedial courses (20 percent in reading and 23 percent in writing).⁴

Students are assigned to remedial courses because of low college-readiness scores on placement exams such as the ACT. One-half of ACT-tested high school graduates in 2005 failed to meet the college-readiness benchmark for reading, while one-third failed to reach the benchmark in English composition. The percentages of those failing to meet the benchmark are higher for specific groups of students: Sixty-two percent of black students and 52 percent of Hispanic students scored at levels that required them to take remedial English courses in college.

ACT Inc. reports that students who meet the college-readiness benchmark have a 75 percent chance of earning at least a C and a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better in college courses.⁵ Students who are college-ready in reading (score of 21 or higher) are more likely to:

- enroll in college;
- achieve a college grade-point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher; and
- return for the second year at the same college.

In a 2004 report, Achieve Inc. found that less than one-half of students entering college complete a baccalaureate degree. Many factors influence this attrition, but the best predictor of bachelor's degree attainment is the preparation students receive in high school. This factor outweighs the impact of both family income and ethnicity.⁶

High school leaders and teachers do not deliberately fail to prepare students. Instead, students are victims of a lack of communication between colleges and high schools. ***In many states and communities, college educators do not tell high school educators about the specific knowledge and skills students will need for success at the postsecondary level.*** In a recent survey, 70 percent of college instructors said they were dissatisfied with their students' ability to read and comprehend complex materials, while 50 percent said they were unhappy with students' ability to express complicated ideas in writing. Yet they have failed to communicate to state boards, districts and secondary schools the specific skills students need for success in their classes.⁷ Therefore, state standards often are different from the skills students need for college classes.

³ Reynolds, J., M. Stewart, R. MacDonald and L. Sischo. *Have Adolescents Become Too Ambitious? U.S. High School Seniors' Career Plans, 1976 to 2000*. Florida State University paper, 2005.

⁴ *The Condition of Education 2004*. National Center for Education Statistics, 2004.

⁵ *What are ACT's College-Readiness Benchmarks?* ACT Inc., 2005.

⁶ *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. Achieve Inc., 2004.

⁷ Peter D. Hart Research Associates. *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* Achieve Inc., 2005.

ACT Inc. compared the college-readiness standards in its tested areas (English, reading, mathematics and science) with the standards developed by 37 states. ***The comparison showed without exception that the state standards fell short of what is needed to be college- and career-ready.*** Moreover, the study revealed that the more rigorous knowledge and skills — those considered by colleges to be most crucial to success beyond high school — are most notably absent from state standards.⁸

A cursory look at high school language arts standards in the SREB states showed that many do not include critical prerequisite reading and writing skills. The following reading and writing skills were missing from many states' standards:

- evaluating information for validity and relevance to a task
- evaluating directions for clarity
- justifying predictions
- analyzing an author's style
- synthesizing information from multiple texts
- creating categories to analyze information
- identifying the most appropriate organization for a paper based on purpose
- using knowledge of text structures to facilitate note-taking
- deriving the meaning of unfamiliar words through knowledge of roots and affixes

These gaps demonstrate the need for literacy indicators aligned to true college- and career-readiness standards. Indicators such as those outlined in this report help teachers and administrators ensure that classroom lessons and graduation standards help students develop essential skills in high school and prepare for success in college and a career.

⁸ *Do Current State Standards and Assessments Reflect College Readiness?: A Case Study.* ACT Inc., 2005.

How Were the Readiness Indicators Developed?

Without states' consensus as to what determines readiness for college and careers, the first step in developing a course was to define the skills and knowledge necessary for success. These skills — or indicators — would form the basis for development of a senior transitional English course to prepare 12th-graders for college and careers.

An expert panel consisting of curriculum and national test developers and high school and college English teachers met to identify the initial set of readiness indicators. The panel addressed three questions:

- What are the essential reading, writing and language arts skills (readiness indicators) that students must master by the end of high school to be successful in entry-level, credit-bearing English courses and other college courses with a heavy emphasis on reading and writing?
- What are some examples of assignments to help students master each identified readiness indicator?
- What assessments will demonstrate whether students have mastered each identified readiness indicator?

The answers to these three questions were based on the judgment of the panel and a review of major reading and language arts curriculum documents, including:

- ACT college-readiness standards in English and reading;
- frameworks for the reading and writing portions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP);
- Standards for the English Language Arts from the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English;
- the National Communication Association's Competent Communicators: K–12 Speaking, Listening, and Media Literacy Standards and Competency Statements;
- the American Diploma Project's College and Workplace Readiness Benchmarks and Samples; and
- the curriculum frameworks from the 16 SREB member states and selected other states.

Using the ACT standards as the starting point, panel members added their experiences in teaching 12th-grade English/language arts, developmental (noncredit) college courses in English and reading, and English 101 to compile a list of essential skills in reading, writing and language arts. The panel organized standards into eight indicators that are tested by college placement exams and included additional indicators in research, connecting reading to the real world, speaking and listening (for a total of 12 indicators) because all college students need these skills and because they are included in most state curriculum guidelines.

To specify the skills for each readiness indicator, panelists considered the following questions:

- What deficits in knowledge, skills and experiences are most common for students in developmental (noncredit) reading and writing courses?
- What skills, knowledge and experiences separate students who succeed in a beginning English composition course or other reading- and writing-dependent classes from those who do not?
- Which deficits in knowledge and skills are most difficult to remedy and which continue to plague students in English and other college classes that depend on reading and writing?

After agreeing upon the indicators, the panel developed sample learning activities and assessments to assist students in meeting college-readiness standards. To help teachers think about logical connections across indicators and multiple exposures to skills, each activity addresses multiple indicators. Many also include connections for cross-disciplinary study that engages students in real-life application of reading and writing skills in other courses. The sample learning activities included in this report can also serve as performance assessments to determine if students meet postsecondary literacy requirements.

To focus assessment on essential skills, this framework includes extensive sample assessment items. The indicators include publicly released test items from ACT and WorkKeys exams that link directly to the outlined skills and are correlated to the 20 to 23 scoring range for the ACT (ready for postsecondary study) and level 5 of WorkKeys (ready for entry-level career positions).

SREB used the initial indicators to conduct a field test in seven high schools in three states. The early responses in classrooms resulted in several revisions. While some students showed significant improvement on college placement exams, others did not. Observations of teachers, analysis of student data, and feedback from teachers and students drove the following changes to the indicators that appear in this report:

- The skills were fine tuned. Through additional study of the placement exams, the number of skills under each indicator was reduced to those considered most essential and most closely aligned to placement tests.
- A single readiness level was identified. When the original indicators included multiple levels, teachers found it difficult to distinguish among the levels so they often resorted to the general indicator statements rather than referencing specific skills.
- The language was simplified and linked more tightly to classroom practice. While all of the teachers in the pilot held English teaching credentials, some of the technical language of the indicators caused confusion.
- The emphasis on literary reading skills was reduced. The indicators now have a greater emphasis on the skills necessary for comprehending expository text, which is what students are more likely to encounter in college.
- The writing indicators include more specifics on drafting and revision. Some teachers needed additional guidance in helping students organize their papers based on logical thinking and producing papers free of grammatical errors.

Based on feedback from the field test, sample assignments and assessments have also undergone revision to ensure a strong emphasis on giving all students a structure for and instruction in gaining the skills necessary to negotiate a variety of texts and related materials, following the RSVP method described by ACT Inc.

The RSVP for Measuring the Complexity of Reading Materials

The reading readiness indicators in this guide suggest skills that all students should be able to perform related to what they read. It is critical to note that students should practice these skills with grade-level texts. While teachers may use simpler texts to introduce skills, they need to make sure students can read advanced-level texts like those they will encounter in postsecondary education and careers. ACT Inc. says complex texts contain RSVP:

Relationships. Interactions among ideas or characters are subtle or complicated.

Richness. Information is often communicated by data or literary devices in sophisticated ways.

Structure. The text is organized in elaborate and sometimes unusual ways.

Style. The author's chosen way of writing is often intricate.

Vocabulary. The author's words are frequently difficult and are highly dependent on the use of context clues.

Purpose. The author's intentions are implicit rather than directly stated.

The indicators and instructional approach outlined in this report:

- provide skills-based lessons to engage students in developing more complex literacy skills.
- use a wider variety of texts.
- cause students to do more expository reading — articles, biographies, memoirs, technical materials and essays.

Reading instruction is focused on targeted reading skills, including summarizing, paraphrasing, categorizing, inferring, predicting and interpreting vocabulary. Most writing activities include a component in which students write for a variety of audiences and purposes. Students master a variety of writing forms, including learning to take effective notes through assorted daily and weekly writing tasks. While note-taking is not assessed on the placement exams, college faculty deemed it an essential skill for success.

How Can Educators and Policy-Makers Use this Report?

The materials in this guide can help school teachers examine what they currently teach and align classroom activities to college- and career-readiness standards; assist school and district leaders in developing a transitional senior English course and aligning all English/language arts curricula; and facilitate conversations between state and district leaders, colleges, and high schools.

Classroom Teachers

English/language arts and reading teachers can use the indicators, activities and sample assessments in this guide to design a 12th-grade transitional English course that will help students master essential skills for college and career readiness. As teachers develop classroom activities they need to consider the following questions:

- Are students assigned frequent and varied reading and language arts tasks that prepare them for college-level work? Do the tasks require students to go beyond surface reading so they can use what they read to make inferences and predictions and to develop and express opinions in ways that influence others?
- Are students given frequent opportunities to summarize, paraphrase, categorize, infer, predict and interpret vocabulary using a variety of expository materials?
- Are the texts complex enough to compel students to use logical reasoning and a variety of strategies to connect, interpret, analyze and synthesize what they read?
- Do students confer with their classmates to develop new interpretations? Do they explain their thinking processes and conclusions to a group of peers? Do they meet with the teacher and fellow students to find ways to improve their writing?
- Are students given real-world reading, writing and speaking assignments that engage and motivate them to learn challenging content — the type of assignments they will have in college and on the job?

Teachers designing a 12th-grade transitional course should utilize standards-based planning to ensure that units:

- focus on four to six essential questions that connect real-life investigation to readiness standards;
- meld reading, writing, speaking, listening and research skills;
- use both individual and cooperative projects;

- target study skills that help students facilitate their learning and other habits of success, such as organizing time and materials, accessing resources, and working well with others;
- culminate with a performance task such as an oral presentation, a business proposal or a position paper;
- incorporate technology in doing research and in writing papers and reports; and
- include reading materials ranging from traditional literature such as *The Canterbury Tales* to adolescent fiction, technical manuals, and journal and op-ed articles.

More information on planning standards-based units can be found in the SREB publication, *Planning for Improved Student Achievement: A Guide to Writing Standards-Based Units and Lessons*.

School Administrators

This report is designed to bring focus to all high school English/language arts classes and other core academic classes. Schools can use the report not only to guide development of a 12th-grade transitional course, but to further align curriculum and instruction in all English and other core academic courses to college- and career-readiness reading and writing standards.

A team of curriculum planners, principals and teachers can use the readiness indicators to examine what and how they teach high school students in English/language arts and reading. They should compare the indicators with standards in local curriculum frameworks and instructional plans and address the following questions:

- Do the essential reading and writing standards in the guide receive the time and depth of coverage necessary to prepare students for postsecondary study?
- Do other topics receive too much attention, while topics that are crucial for success in college and a career are underdeveloped or not included at all?
- How will we customize the materials for teaching particular skills at each grade level?
- How can we increase the complexity of writing assignments each year?
- Which activities are essential building blocks for the subsequent year?
- How will grading criteria differ each year?
- What materials should be required reading at each grade level?
- How will we know if a student has mastered a skill at the expectation level in each grade?

State and District Leaders

States and districts can use the readiness indicators as a starting point to develop their own indicators for replicating the SREB process. The process begins by bringing all partners into the discussion, including school teachers and administrators, postsecondary instructors, and local and state curriculum specialists. It is important to also incorporate other resources — such as national assessment standards from the ACT, the SAT and the NAEP — to help define standards in reading and writing for college and career readiness.

Evidence of Success: Broome High School Redesigns Senior English

Teachers and administrators at **Broome High School** in Spartanburg, South Carolina, accepted the challenge of preparing more students for postsecondary studies. The Spartanburg district offers opportunities for students to attend more than a dozen community colleges, technical schools, and public and private colleges. However, according to the high school's principal, many of Broome's graduates proved unprepared for postsecondary study.

Broome administrators received permission from the Spartanburg District 3 school board to offer Transitional Senior English and Advanced Placement (AP) English as the only options for students to earn the required senior English graduation credit. Each section of Transitional Senior English included a wide range of students, from those in special education to former honors students.

In conjunction with its postsecondary partner, Spartanburg Community College, Broome High School administers the pre- and post-ASSET tests to all rising seniors. English teachers use the results to stress to students the importance of being prepared for college courses. (For more information about the ASSET test, see the Appendix, page 59.)

A New Way to Teach

Broome's senior English teachers began planning and delivering instruction by implementing skills they learned in *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* professional development. The school provided collaborative planning time for developing standards-based units using the SREB readiness indicators. The teachers embraced the concept of delivering state-required content by using a standards-driven rather than literature-driven approach. They presented the required content in multiple-day instructional units unified by themes and aligned closely with the readiness indicators and the state standards. ***The teachers say they will never go back to a textbook-driven curriculum — one in which they simply move from one passage to another rather than designing assignments that engage students in meeting standards and motivate further learning.***

Before teachers participated in *HSTW* professional development, Broome's senior English class focused on British literature. Students read selections from the anthology and completed a section test, or they read a novel and wrote a book report on the content.

Teachers said that each unit of Transitional Senior English requires students to extend what they read and to summarize and paraphrase materials for their own writing. Students also develop alternate endings that stay true to the text, integrate outside readings with the primary text, generate games and projects based on themes and symbols, and apply what they read to the real world. In one project, students draw on their knowledge of the prologue to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* to organize a modern-day pilgrimage to a famous site.

A New Way to Learn

Instead of working alone, students complete many assignments by working in pairs or groups. Each student is responsible for a specific aspect of the assignment. Working together teaches students the value of teamwork skills and ensures all team members are fully involved in completing the project.

No longer do all students read the same selections. Often, students are assigned to literature circles based on Lexile reading-level scores and post-high school interests. This approach allows teachers to differentiate instruction and provide high-interest reading choices. Students now read at least five books and many shorter passages. Frequently, the selections include expository texts such as journal articles and technical manuals. Students also complete weekly outside reading assignments that focus on improving their skills in analyzing and evaluating authors' messages and how they are presented.

Other Benefits of the Course

Class writings require students to use critical thinking skills to analyze and critique a specific work or a collection of works. Also, students now redo all work that does not meet standards.

Teachers have incorporated more research opportunities. Students use technology and the media center to complete individual and group tasks. They search online databases and learn to evaluate the credibility of sources.

Transitional Senior English builds students' sense of responsibility and develops study habits that are vital in postsecondary studies. For example, students receive a weekly lesson plan that outlines all assignments in advance and are held accountable for developing a schedule to complete the work on time.

The Transitional Course Is Effective

The new approach is working. A total of 303 students took the reading pre- and post-assessment as part of the Transitional Senior English course. Of the students who met the readiness standards on the pre-assessment, often at the minimum level, 51 percent posted improved scores on the post-assessment, a sign that they had strengthened their readiness for postsecondary study. Of the 148 students who did not meet the readiness standards on the pre-assessment, 44 improved enough to meet the standards on the post-assessment. By the end of the course, 199 students met the readiness standards. Of the 304 students who took the writing pre-assessment, 124 showed improved scores on the post-assessment.

The effectiveness of the Transitional Senior English course is reflected in students' classroom participation. Broome High School students who completed the *HSTW* Student Survey were more likely to participate in recommended activities in English class than their counterparts from the previous *HSTW* Assessment. The percentage of students who said they wrote short, graded papers each week rose from 57 percent to 68 percent over two years. More students reported that they revised papers each week — an increase from 30 percent to 41 percent in the same time frame.

English/Language Arts Readiness Indicators for Postsecondary Studies and Careers

1. Develop vocabulary appropriate to reading, writing and speaking proficiency.
2. Summarize, paraphrase and categorize information.
3. Analyze the relationship(s) and purpose(s) within a text and across texts.
4. Make inferences and predictions.
5. Connect what is read to personal experience and the world beyond the classroom.
6. Identify the elements of texts (e.g., purpose, theme, plot) and analyze the author's development of them.
7. Compose writing that conveys a clear main point with logical support.
8. Edit and revise writing for the strongest effect.
9. Use English language structure and grammar appropriately to communicate effectively.
10. Use research skills to locate, gather, evaluate and organize information for different purposes.
11. Use appropriate organization, language, voice, style of delivery and visual aids to match the audiences and purposes of oral presentations.
12. Use active listening strategies to organize and respond to information presented in different formats for different purposes.

This section of the report contains the following for each indicator:

- explanation of how the indicator relates to success in college and careers
- guidance for teaching the indicator
- readiness skills
- suggested learning activities
- sample performance tasks and test items

Sample test items are released from ACT and WorkKeys assessments and are used with their permission. It should be noted that all test items are asked within the context of a passage that students would not have seen before. The passages are not included in this report because of copyright restrictions, but the items provide examples of questions that teachers could construct.