Focus on reading

The Amplify Library as a digital instructional tool

A digital solution to the challenge of developing broad literacy

The aim of developing broad literacy, central to the Common Core Standards, is laid out in the Amplify Library mission statement. The library’s curated collection of more than 600 classic and contemporary texts spans a full range of genres, topics, and cultural perspectives—a diversity meant to support students as they develop literacy skills. The library’s range of Lexile scores, with adult classics from Thoreau, Austen, and T.S. Eliot on one end of the spectrum, and a full complement of fourth- and fifth-grade level texts on the other, allows teachers and students to find appropriately challenging texts for every reader. It lets each reader climb a “staircase of text complexity,” as described in the CCSS ELA/Literacy.

For classroom teachers, the virtual Amplify Library facilitates a Common Core-aligned curriculum in ways that no physical library can.

Everyone is holding a copy. Whatever book you or a student is discussing, the whole class can pull it up on their screens. Keyword search, a chapter navigation bar, and numbering for chapters, pages, paragraphs, even lines, allows everyone to quickly find the exact spot in the text.

Tools for active reading. Bookmarking, highlighting, and annotating functions are built into the digital texts, just as they are built into daily reading assignments. Teachers can easily differentiate reading practices; those practices can become habits.

Integrated with gaming. The virtual library is, itself, the vast, fantasy library in which the Amplify ELA game world, Lexica, is set. Players explore this library with a personal avatar that grows and earns magical powers as they read. Embedded games within Lexica help students to develop spelling, vocabulary, and grammar skills.

Integrated with research. The Amplify Library is designed for two kinds of research experiences: one that guides you through a major unit of the ELA curriculum at two points each year, and another that’s composed of independent reading. Each is discussed further in sections that follow.

The increased emphasis on content-rich informational texts is identified in the CCSS ELA/Literacy as one of the most important shifts in the new standards—part of preparing for college and career. Literacy standards are now, for the first time, demanded for non-ELA content areas (history/social studies, science, technical subjects, and others), and ELA is called on to lead the way.
Approach to research

The selection process for text in the Amplify Library was guided by the recommendations of highly respected professional publications, including Booklist, School Library Journal, Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA), Horn Book, Kirkus, and Publishers Weekly. Selections include winners of the most prestigious awards, including Caldecott, Newbery, Coretta Scott King, Michael L. Printz, Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age, ALA Notable Books, Bank Street College Best Children’s Books of the Year, and others. Publishers in the collection include: Penguin/Random House; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; HarperCollins; Little, Brown; Oxford University Press; Candlewick Press; and others.

Narrative non-fiction
Most important, however, is that the collection is engaging in a way that provides for student interest and motivation. Narrative non-fiction is especially important in the CCSS’s discussion of non-fiction, and, within that genre, the sub-genres of biography and memoir. These form a major component of the Amplify Library’s non-fiction collection, which features sports, business, and political figures, while also giving special focus to those who’ve struggled throughout history for human rights.

Biographies and memoirs
Biographies and memoirs of contemporary and familiar figures are particularly compelling to students. The Amplify Library has a selection of such texts, including biographies of Apple founder Steve Jobs and of Tumblr founder David Karp. Other books in the collection are more historic, such as the personal stories of Benjamin Franklin and John Glenn, and many of these feature voices and stories traditionally left out of the history taught in school—those of women and minorities. Students get to read the words of Sarah Morgan Dawson in A Confederate Girl’s Diary, as well as three different memoirs and biographies of African-American slaves, or the story of Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina member of the US Supreme Court.

A focus on human rights and achievements
The struggle for human rights is a sub-genre of its own among memoirs and biographies, with stories from the Nazi Holocaust, Gandhi’s stand against British rule in the 1930s, the fight for women’s rights in Iran and Afghanistan, and life under repressive regimes in China. Sports memoirs and biographies capitalize on another area of student interest, and there, too, at least 12 focus on minorities and women of pioneering achievement in their disciplines, from track’s Wilma Rudolph and Jesse Owens to soccer’s Hope Solo and skating’s Michelle Kwan.
Science and history
Our collection of science texts are focused on contemporary topics, including the revolutionary ideas of biologist Rob Dunn, who suggests that our germ-free modern life is at the root of many disorders endemic to the current age. The evolution of scientific understanding is another sub-genre of the Amplify Library, beginning with the curriculum units on brain science and space exploration, and extending through texts students can read independently (such as a story on the 19th-century archaeologist who claimed to have discovered ancient Troy). The independent reading texts also include histories of engineering science, transportation, and architecture. Other history texts include the 10-volume History of US series by Hakim Joy, specifically recommended by the CCSS for ELA/Literacy as an exemplary informational text.

The library’s offerings in the many sub-genres of fiction are vast and inclusive. Some of the most popular contemporary novels for middle schoolers, such as the Lemony Snicket series, take their place alongside the classics: Jules Verne, Agatha Christie, L. Frank Baum, Herman Melville, and many others. A good way to get a sense of the selection is to browse our reading suggestions by using the book lists provided. The titles themselves make the clearest statement of the range, the challenge, and the specific strength of the Amplify Library in the areas prioritized by the CCSS for ELA/Literacy.

Structured Research Collections
Guided, inquiry-based skill development within the curriculum

Should chocolate be part of school lunches?
The question forms the focus of a class debate—but not before students have developed informational literacy skills, learning how to evaluate online sources and avoid plagiarism. And not before they have explored the Amplify Research Collections by means of a scavenger hunt and finally moved beyond the Collections environment to research further in the wide world of the Internet. Only then are they fully prepared to debate the pressing question of whether or not chocolate should be included in school lunches. After the debate, students move on to writing a research paper and creating and presenting a multimedia project.

The work within the Collection units have a particular structure that is designed to introduce, reinforce, and develop research skills. The Collections are focused on a variety of topics, including: the California Gold Rush, the Titanic, the Space Race, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and the art, history, and science of chocolate. The pattern of the unit stays the same but the level of competence—in planning, evaluating sources, gathering ideas and information, and integrating them into presentations—builds with each experience.
Research, in the CCSS ELA/Literacy, is tied to 21st-century learning. Emphasis is placed on the critical thinking required that students need to sift through all of the information available through technology (Chapter 2). Perhaps more important, it is tied to the kind of learning that matters in today’s world because it is inquiry-based. In researching, students review texts and images that span time periods, genres, and disciplinary boundaries. In addition, this work involves one of the major new points of emphasis in the revised standards: responding and arguing from textual evidence.

The Amplify Research Collections support this kind of learning with diverse and interdisciplinary materials. The Chocolate Collection, for instance, ranges in history and geography from prehistoric Native American and ancient Aztec civilizations, through colonial West Africa, 18th-century Italy, 19th-century France, and the 20th and 21st-century United States. It takes in labor analysis by William Cadbury, opera by Mozart, and beat literature from Jack Kerouac. Everything but actually eating chocolate is included. In the end, issues including ethics (exploitation), environment, and health are brought to bear on the question of whether school lunches should include chocolate.

Research archives

**Lapham’s Archives: Collections designed for independent research**

Lapham’s Archives are collections of texts and images focused on a theme that were developed in collaboration with the editors at the literary magazine *Lapham’s Quarterly*. There are 17 in all, and they span a wide range of topics, from Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad to Chichén Itzá to Cesar Chavez. Each Archive contains two research-style questions for students to use as guides through their reading and information-gathering. The research questions from the archive on Japanese internment camps during WWII ask, “What happened to individuals who refused to swear loyalty to the US government? Why was choosing allegiance to America over allegiance to Japan such a difficult choice for some Japanese-Americans?” A question from the archive on Cesar Chavez and migrant workers asks, “What methods did farm workers use to protest their unfair treatment, and why were they effective?”

The research skills that students have developed in the Collections curriculum units have provided them with the tools they need to set out on their own and explore the archives. As students continue to hone their researching skills, they start to demonstrate a number of the “capacities of literate individuals” discussed in the CCSS ELA/Literacy. They demonstrate:

- Independence.
- Content knowledge.
- An appreciation of evidence.
- Comprehension and ability to critique.
Archives selections
Each of the Archives listed below includes dozens of individual written and visual resources to support students’ research and can be accessed through the Amplify Library.

- African-American Women Writers
- Body Snatchers
- Cesar Chavez and Migrant Workers
- Chichén Itzá
- Chinese Cultural Revolution
- Creation Myths and End of Days
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Emily Dickinson
- Gandhi
- Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad
- Japanese Internment Camps
- Modern Day Romeo and Juliet
- Navajo Code Talkers
- Norse Mythology
- Sacagawea
- The Silk Road
- Yosemite and John Muir