

# Deciding on Learning Content

*Increasing Student Achievement  
Advancing Teacher Practice*



**About this document:** This document is designed to guide a teacher's SLO development specifically with regard to the learning content element. It contains a four-step protocol for thinking through this important element and provides an example for how a teacher might engage in this protocol.



**About TIF 4 and CTAC:** As part of the Teacher Incentive Fund 4 (TIF 4) work, Washoe County School District (WCSD) has partnered with the Community Training and Assistance Center (CTAC) in the use of Student Learning Objectives (SLOs). CTAC provides technical assistance to the district and TIF 4 working groups based on 16 years of research and practice with SLOs.

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*As confirmed in research, learning content is a vital element to an SLO. It truly anchors the SLO by providing the content to measure, staging the interval during which strategies are employed, and setting up the level of growth students will attain for the standards. Below is a guide to support the selection of focused, coherent, and pivotal learning content.*

**1. Begin by looking at the entire set of applicable course standards.**

➤ **Scan the document(s)**

- Becoming familiar with the entire scope of content for the course is important, along with any accompanying narrative. Note how the standards are structured (e.g., broad headings, subsection headings, areas of emphasis) and referenced (e.g., letters, numbers, sub-bullets).

**2. Analyze the importance of the standards through two lenses:**

➤ **Content Needs (the “timeless”)**

- What fundamental standards must be mastered by students in this course?
- What have I typically found during the years to be difficult but important content for students to master?
- What does my district, state, or national group of experts say are key standards for this course?
- How can I best prepare students for deeper learning in subsequent courses for this content area?

➤ **Current Student Needs (the “timely”)**

- Have I broadly assessed my students in all of the various areas for this course?
- What are the current needs my students?
- What do students’ baseline assessment results demonstrate as specific areas of need for students?

**3. Select focused, coherent, and pivotal standards that will both ensure students have a strong foundation in the course, and are areas of needs for the students.**

➤ **Focused**

- Is the selection too narrow or broad in scope?
- Can I measure all of these standards in my baseline and culminating assessments?

➤ **Coherent**

- Have I linked the selection to other aspects of the course of study as appropriate?
- Is there a common theme or interrelatedness connecting these standards?

➤ **Pivotal**

- Are the standards important from a perspective of content need and student need?
- Have I balanced these two perspectives appropriately to warrant this focus?

**4. Craft a rationale.**

➤ **Reflect on the above steps**

- Think back to your analyses above. Tell why these standards are focused in terms of quantity, coherent in terms of their relationship to one another, and pivotal from a perspective of both content need and current student need.

The following is an example of how a teacher of Grade 2 ELA approached the decision of learning content using the protocol from page 2.

## 1. Begin by looking at the entire set of applicable course standards.

### ➤ Scan the document(s)

- The teacher looks at the *Nevada Academic Content Standards in English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. He/she knows there are six grade-specific strands to the standards rooted in anchor standards: Reading Standards for Literature, Reading Standards for Informational Text, Reading Standards: Foundational Skills, Writing Standards, Speaking and Listening Standards, and Language Standards. The narrative sections, such as the introduction along with the charts for language progressions and text complexity add to the understanding of the course content.



## 2. Analyze the importance of the standards through two lenses:

### ➤ Content Needs (the “timeless”)

- Literacy is important to everyday life and the expectations have really been elevated in our new standards. I know one of the shifts in ELA is to infuse more informational texts at the early grades.
- “Students often struggle with aspects of reading comprehension, and given the increase in text complexity throughout ELA standards across the grades, this will be particularly important to focus on.”
- “In our new standards that are internationally benchmarked, and agreed on by national, state, and local experts, there are shifts needed, such as practicing regularly with complex texts, using evidence from texts, and building knowledge through nonfiction.”
- By ensuring students perform at the new and higher levels of text complexity for my grade level, I will be helping them tackle progressively more complex texts in the future.



### ➤ Current Student Needs (the “timely”)

- Our school-wide diagnostic assessment from this year and our summative assessment from last year both measure all strands of ELA except speaking and listening and language.
- I have observed during my first month with students that their oral language and listening skills are in most cases on par or close to being on par for this point in the year. Our reading scores, however, stand out as the lowest area that our students need the most help with—even more than math.
- The baseline results (which are pulled from our diagnostic assessment data) show a clear need in the area of reading. Specific to literature, we need to focus on characters, story structure, and vocabulary. With regard to informational texts, the lowest scores show a need in the areas of connections, text structure, and key ideas.

The following example continues of how a teacher of Grade 2 ELA approached the decision of learning content using the protocol from page 2.

### 3. *Select focused, coherent, and pivotal standards that will both ensure students have a strong foundation in the course, and are areas of needs for the students.*

Selection:

- ◆ RL.2.3, RL.2.4, RL.2.5, RL.2.6, RL.2.7
- ◆ RI.2.2, RI.2.3, RI.2.4, RI.2.5, RI.2.6, RI.2.8

#### ➤ Focused

- The scope is far from too narrow, as it includes quite a bit more than just two standards. It is not too broad though, since it focuses on just a few key areas of both literature and informational texts.
- These standards plus others are measured by our baseline (diagnostic) and culminating assessments. We will only use the score information for these standards when calculating scores in the SLO.

#### ➤ Coherent

- The standards have a common theme of reading: story elements for literature, and informational elements for informational texts. While I will teach all standards for the course as well, they are not formally included in the SLO.
- These are all areas that students struggled with. There is also a theme across the text types (e.g., story structure in literature and text structure in informational texts).

#### ➤ Pivotal

- These standards are important for my students, given these are the lowest performing standards students demonstrated on the baseline assessment and on last year's summative assessment. These standards are important from a content perspective, as reading texts of higher complexity is expected in this and future courses, and because students need to be equally exposed to and comfortable with literature and informational texts.
- The perspectives of content need and my current students' needs are in common and I have therefore balanced these perspectives.



### 4. *Craft a rationale.*

#### ➤ Reflect on the above steps

- In the SLO: Of the 63 standards in Grade 2 ELA, 28 are in reading and this SLO addresses 11 of those 28 that my students need most. The standards are coherent in that they interrelate across text types (e.g., story structure for RL and text structure for RI). These standards are pivotal not just because my students need them, which both our baseline scores indicate as do their summative results from last year in Grade 1 ELA, but also because these standards reflect new levels of rigor in text complexity, and honor the pedagogical shifts needed to prepare students for college and careers, through working with complex texts and building knowledge through nonfiction.

