

## *The New ELAR TEKS: Highlighting the Independent Reading Student Expectation*

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### **Abstract**

*The new ELAR TEKS includes a new standard that requires students to “self-select text and read independently for a sustained period of time” (19 TAC Chapter 110). Though independent reading has been a literacy practice across the state, the state standards has only recently included it as a student expectation. Literacy leaders include independent reading as a must-have element of a well-balanced literacy classroom. This article will demonstrate the value of independent reading, breakdown the SE into instructional parts, and highlight two SEs that require integration. This SE provides teachers the direction needed to include independent reading into the classroom as part of a balanced literacy instructional experience for Texas students.*

**Keywords:** *TEKS, independent reading, self-selected texts*

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Approved in 2017 by the State Board of Education, the kindergarten through eighth grade TEKS were implemented this fall, and the ninth through 12th-grade TEKS will be implemented next fall. In these new standards, a student expectation (SE) has been included for independent reading: “self-select text and read independently for a sustained period of time” (19 TAC Chapter 110). This article will demonstrate the value of independent reading, breakdown the SE into instructional parts, and highlight two SEs that require integration. The focus of this article is the Independent Reading SE. However, the strands of the new TEKS should not be taught in isolation. The strands, as explained in the introduction, are to be integrated across literacy instruction (19 TAC Chapter 110).

Research demonstrates a relationship between independent reading and an increase in vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, language acquisition, writing ability, and general academic performance (Anderson, Fielding, and Wilson, 1988, Guthrie, 2007, International Reading Association, 2014, Krashen, 2011, National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). The International Literacy Association, in a shared position statement with the Canadian Children’s Book Centre and the National Council of Teachers of English, call on leadership to promote daily independent reading (2014), and on literacy instructors to include independent reading as a must-have element of a well-balanced literacy classroom (Morell, 2019, Calkins, 2013, Atwell, 2016, Gallagher, 2003, Kittle, 2012).

## **Five Skills Embedded in the Independent Reading Student Expectation (SE)**

The state does not dictate how teachers teach the standards found in the TEKS, so the Independent Reading SE was created with a focus on the skills included in text selection and independent reading. The SE reads: The student is expected to “self-select text and read independently for a sustained period of time” (19 TAC Chapter 110). There are five student skills embedded into this standard: recognizing reading ability, choosing reading interests, locating texts, reading independently, and sustaining engagement with a single text.

### **Recognizing Reading Ability**

Walking into the library to choose a book can be a daunting task. Without guidance or a plan, students may choose books that are inaccessible to them based on their reading abilities. “Self-selected” moves beyond students randomly choosing books in the library. To be able to “self-select” a text, students need to learn to recognize which texts they can successfully read in addition to choosing what they might enjoy. To accomplish this, experienced readers scan and maybe read the first few pages to determine how well they comprehend the text before settling on a book. For students new to self-selection, matching themselves to a text may require teacher or librarian guidance and perhaps the use of some strategies to scaffold their decisions until they are proficient at choosing books they feel confident reading.

For self-selected reading, requiring students to read from a leveled text and reducing their choices to their reading level are a misuse of leveled texts (Parrott, 2017). When educators label books and limit ranges, they not only limit student choice and expose students’ academic levels to peers, but they are also denying students the opportunity to learn how to self-identify their own reading level. Instead, students need to be able to self-select a text without the support of leveling systems, so they

can become fully independent in their book selections. Pernille Ripp shares several strategies that she has used to help students find “just right” texts both in her library classroom and at the library. She groups books together in bins by topic or genre, so students can flip through a set of interesting texts until they find one on their level. Also, she calls books selection “book shopping” and has turned it into a class social event where students look through the books and share their choices with each other, and she gives them time to shop without rushing them (2016).

### **Choosing Reading Interests**

These same strategies will also support students who are developing reading interests. To assure our students have access to interesting books, libraries should contain diverse texts on a wide range of topics. Since 2014, We Need Diverse Books ([weneeddiversebooks.org](http://weneeddiversebooks.org)) has promoted the works of diverse authors and sought opportunities to increase their presence. Time in independent reading may be free choice for students to choose from diverse texts, or from a collection of texts in coordination with a unit or theme. For example, teachers may ask students to choose a non-fiction text based on a shared research topic or a fiction text when they are studying literary devices. Some teachers may ask students to keep at least one book for independent reading with a narrative structure to support class lessons. Students still choose freely, but a student freely choosing nonfiction may choose to keep two independent reading books pulling out the narrative text for classwork.

### **Locating Texts**

To find interesting books, students may need to learn how to use the libraries’ catalogue systems, collaborate with teachers, librarians and peers, and keep lists of potential books for future selection. School librarians offer support to students through library catalogues and databases to sort books and then locate them in

the library. As students rely on each other and book lists collected from book talks and peer recommendations, a reminder to seek new texts in the library with the catalogue helps increase the students' abilities to locate texts independently. Though recommended books support text selection, students should also be able to choose based on their own understanding of how well they read and their personal interests.

### **Independent and Sustained**

“Independently,” means that students read to themselves. Except for kindergarten through third grade, where the SEs include a qualifier allowing adult assistance, the expectation is that students read alone from a book that they chose. Students must practice reading independently to gain the academic benefits obtained by reading for pleasure in a text that is appropriate to their skill level.

The final words of the SE, “for a sustained amount of time”, is intentionally vague to accommodate the age of the child and school schedules. Our youngest students will grow to be able to read for longer periods, but for older students that are changing classes, they may need a block for independent reading. This wording gives teachers flexibility to build sustained reading into various schedules. Richard Allington recommends high volume reading, citing studies with thirty minutes of independent reading per day (2014), but just twenty-one minutes of independent reading per day can significantly improve the academic performance of students (Beers and Probst, 2017, 135; Scholastic, 2013). To assure students become good readers, they simply must spend time reading (Allington, 2014). Setting this time aside for our students will lead to better academic skills when paired with explicit instruction to support growing readers as they comprehend and analyze the texts they read. (Beers and Probst, 2017; Miller and Sharp, 2018; Goldberg and Houser, 2017).

### **Explicit Markers to Integrate Independent Reading in the TEKS**

Markers can be defined as places in the new TEKS where direct references are made from one strand to another to encourage cross-strand integration. Though the introduction to the new standards clearly establishes the expectations for the integration of the strands during instruction, there are two places where “self-selected reading” was explicitly noted beyond the Independent Reading SE itself. These two places, where independent reading fits in especially well, the TEKS included markers to point them out to teachers new to the standards. The first is in the Comprehension strand and the second is in the Response strand.

### **Integrating Comprehension and Independent Reading**

The first of these markers occurs in the second strand, Comprehension. The first SE in the Comprehension strand reads, “establish purpose for reading assigned and self-selected texts” (19 TAC Chapter 110). This same standard is present in every grade level with kindergarten through second grade adding the additional phrase “with adult assistance” (19 TAC Chapter 110) to the end of the student expectation. There are many ways to establish a purpose for reading, and many of these can be found in the Comprehension strand (19 TAC Chapter 110) developed based on Person’s (2002) research on reading comprehension:

- (B) generate questions about text before, during, and after reading
- (C) make, correct or confirm predictions using text features, characteristics of genre and structures
- (D) create mental images to deepen understanding
- (E) make connections to personal experiences, ideas in other texts, and society;
- (F) make inferences and use evidence to support understanding;
- (G) evaluate details read to determine key ideas

(H) synthesize information to create new understanding; and

monitor comprehension and make adjustments such as re-reading, using background knowledge, asking questions, and annotating when understanding breaks down

Each of these student expectations from the Comprehension strand may be established as a purpose for reading that will in turn support student comprehension. These student expectations, when modeled by the teacher, provide students the skills to combat confusion when they are reading independently (Duke and Pearson, 2002). Teachers are expected to integrate comprehension skills with students as they read independently by setting a reading purpose.

### **Integrating Response and Independent Reading**

The second independent reading marker that explicitly crosses over to independent reading is in the third strand, Response. The first SE in the Response strand, reads, “describe personal connections to a variety of sources, including self-selected texts” (19 TAC Chapter 110). Here the word choice of “including” means that it is required instead of “such as” which in a TEKS document would indicate that examples are provided but the teacher may choose something beyond the selection provided. (19 TAC Chapter 110). The SE indicates a “variety of sources,” followed by “including self-selected texts”. This juxtaposition of seemingly different text sources indicates that students should practice response skills with a range of texts, but they must also create responses to their self-selected texts.

Making personal responses moves beyond knowing what the text says and asking what the text says to them, the reader. As Kylee Beers and Robert Probst share in *Disrupting Thinking*:

It’s not enough to hold a reader’s interest and it’s not enough to solve our complex problems.

We need students who can do more than answer questions; today’s complex world requires that our next generation of leaders be able to raise questions. They need to be able to hold multiple ideas in their minds. They need to be able to see a situation from multiple perspectives (2017, p. 21).

This is supported by Victoria Young who in response to the new TEKS shared that each strand “must include thinking, since the development of literacy skills is dependent on students’ ability to think clearly, coherently, and flexibly about what they are reading...” (2018, p. 7). But to engage students in the deep thinking required by the new standards students need interesting texts to read and that matter to them as unique and diverse readers.

Texas schools have rich diversity, and it is often in self-selected independent reading that students make personal connections with books (Beers and Probst 2017, Miller and Sharp, 2018). Intentional student selection from a diverse library will help students make personal connections in the books they read. This is also a requirement of the TEKS where the multi-genre strand calls for “increasingly complex traditional, contemporary, classical, and diverse literary texts,” (19 TAC Chapter 110).

With this in mind, teachers should support students as they include personal responses based on their lived experiences. Teachers may ask students how various texts express their culture within their communities, and how the reading of texts changes their perspectives (Anila, 2017). As an example, students may choose to respond to their independent reading by writing a letter to introduce themselves to a character.

These types of assignments provide students opportunities to leverage their growing literacy skills by connecting their personal experiences with texts that they self-selected based on their abilities and their authentic interests.

## **Conclusion**

The new TEKS represents new opportunities to create lessons and curriculum that will increase the engagement and achievement of literacy skills for Texas students. With an independent reading SE, educators can integrate self-selected choice reading and encourage their students' unique interests across diverse texts. The repetition of this SE from K-12 demonstrates the need to promote students

reading independently early with ongoing, continual practice through every grade. Also important is the expectation that independent reading does not exist as an isolated activity apart from the regular skill building in lessons (19 TAC Chapter 110; Young, 2018). By integrating students' self-selected books across the strands, including Comprehension and Response, independent reading will become part of a balanced approach to literacy in Texas classrooms.

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