When Jenny Felts, a first-grade teacher at Eastside Elementary in Rogers, Arkansas, thought about implementing the new Common Core English language arts standards in her classroom, she was apprehensive. In May 2010, Felts started a unit comparing Cinderella stories from around the world. The stories—James Marshall’s Cinderella, Yen Shen: A Cinderella Story From China, Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters, and others—were more rigorous, with more advanced vocabulary, than the basal readers she’d been using.

Felts quickly found that her first graders were eagerly engaged in learning about different countries, listening to the stories, and comparing them. Instead of using a Venn diagram, Felts created a large-scale visual chart and color-coded stories to encourage students to compare each new tale they read. The colorful chart helped students simultaneously make connec-
“As I looked at the standards, I realized I needed to take my lessons even deeper.” —Shelly Knutt

How It Affects You
As your state implements the Common Core standards, the amount of change you’ll see in your classroom depends on your current standards. Overall, in reading, the rigor will increase, as well as the depth of knowledge that you’re used to teaching 15 topics,” says Phillips, “now there will only be two or three.” The standards also set more comprehensive expectations. For example, instead of teaching to individual standards about identifying plot, setting, and characters, students will be expected to describe, retell, analyze, and compare stories using their understanding of story elements.

In math, the Common Core standards are focused on key math concepts. Math instruction, says Bill McCallum, a math professor at the University of Arizona who helped write the math standards, has been too spread out, and teachers haven’t been spending enough time on any one concept. As a result, instead of working on all areas of math starting in kindergarten, the Common Core math standards are focused on building number and operation skills in kindergarten through fifth grade. Algebra, data, and statistics are introduced in the middle grades. The goal, says McCallum, is “to help teachers see the structure of math, and try to help students progress from one part to another.”

Now that the standards are written, the next challenge is to create assessments. Common Core assessments will likely be more performance-based, says Roberts Alley, Arizona’s associate superintendent of standards and assessment. For example, in language arts, students might need to read and respond to questions that require higher-order thinking. In math, students might be asked to explain how they solved problems.

“My hope,” says McCallum, “is that those assessments won’t be the high- and low-level multiple-choice tests but instead test students’ skill and understanding in a different way.

Refocusing Your Instruction
Regardless of how your state is preparing for the Common Core, here’s how to reframe your instruction around higher standards.

Delve Deeper in Discussions
After reading How the Camel Got Its Hump to her second-grade students, Shelly Knutt, a teacher in Asheville, North Carolina, proposed a discussion of the characters, setting, plot, and moral. “I thought I’d done a great job with the math standards for students,” Knutt. “But then as I sat down and looked at the Common Core standards, I realized that I hadn’t taken it nearly as deep as I should have.”

Knutt refocused her lesson, reread the story with her students, and led a discussion that surprised her. Instead of surface morals that her students had suggested the first time around (e.g., Be nice, be true to yourself), they wove in more complex morals: Do what people ask you of. Do things the first time around. Be nice, but be tough.

Knutt realized how much material she’d skimmed over in order to check that she had hit off her list. Listening to her students’ discussion helped Knutt realize which of them needed more time to process the lesson. “I have many ELA students in my class,” says Knutt. “I saw that I needed to slow down to let them discuss.”

As you discuss literature, it’s vital to teach your students how to slow down, think, and respond to every-one’s ideas. If you need to, revisit

WHERE TO LEARN MORE
Here are four great sites where you can find the standards and start connecting with teachers to discuss and share ideas.

1. commoncore.org
   performance standards. To find out how you might implement the standards in your classroom, consider using a planner—a curriculum plan-nnig tool focused around the standards that breaks the school year into six-week units.

2. corestandards.org
   The Common Core State Standards initiative includes information on what each state is doing, as well as links to the English language arts standards, math standards, and more resources.

3. illustrativemathematics.org
   Join the conversa-tion at the Illustrative Mathematics Project, a site maintained by the University of Arizona. Here, a network of teachers is working with Common Core standards to share ideas and activities.

4. nctm.org
   Join the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics for suggestions on how to incorporate the Common Core State standards, as well as an array of PowerPoint presenta-tions to share with your colleagues.