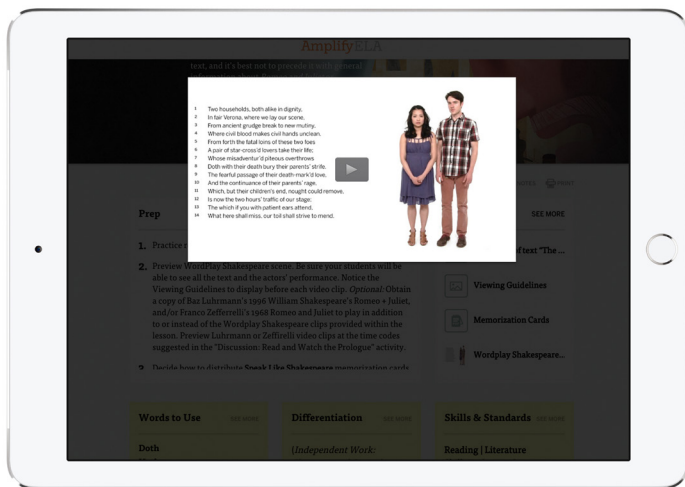


What's worth reading: Texts to build knowledge and skills

Text selection for middle school



Amplify's text selection in its core units

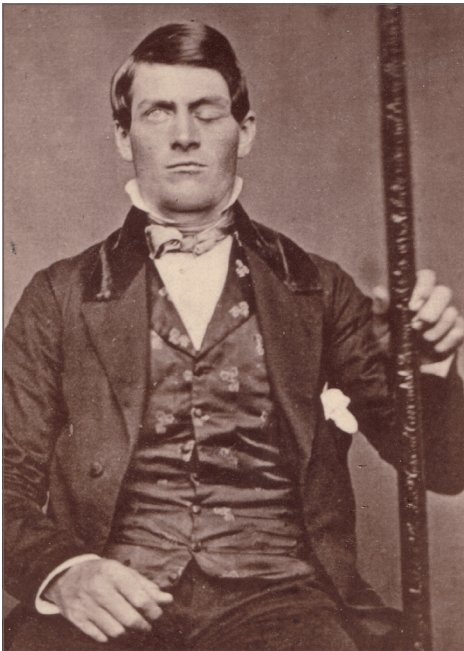
Carefully selected for their adherence to the California's ELA/ELD Framework, the texts in the Amplify curriculum balance literary and informational text, and include a rich representation of genres: novels, plays, poetry, memoirs, and other full-length texts. Moreover, the Amplify team has sequenced these texts to create a "staircase" of steadily increasing complexity as measured by the three dimensions detailed in the CA ELA/ELD Framework: quantitative measures, qualitative measures and task considerations. To account for the wide variation among middle school readers, Amplify provides each teacher with extensive differentiation options from which he or she can choose to ensure that all students can access every one of these texts. This distinctive selection and sequencing process gives students and teachers the materials they need to reach a higher set of standards than they have been required to reach before.

Unlike more traditional textbook publishers, Amplify was founded to create a transformational digital experience for K-12 students and teachers who need to meet the demands of the new CA CCSS for ELA Literacy. In a fundamental sense, Amplify started from scratch. And because we didn't come to this challenge trailing a legacy of past choices and commitments tied to a different set of standards, we were able to choose texts for the simple reason that they were the best solution to the problem in front of us: how to engage middle school students in reading complex text.

To take full advantage of this opportunity, Amplify assembled a team of top-flight educators to explore what middle school students have been reading across the country and to discuss how well these traditional readings could meet the challenge of the new standards. To this group of educators, we added designers and artists—as well as gaming experts and professionals from the entertainment industry—to push us to consider the full range of ways we could use new media to help our students tap into the power of these texts.

At the same time, we also brought in top academics in fields ranging from classics to poetry to political science to history—and invited each to point us toward the richest texts in their disciplines: those best-suited to engage students in the most important parts of the subjects they know so well. We also brought in public intellectuals such as Walter Isaacson (author of *Einstein*; *Benjamin Franklin*; *Steve Jobs*; and *The Innovators*), who could push what we aim to do with those texts. Under Isaacson's guidance, the Frankenstein team developed a unit that reads Mary Shelley's classic alongside the work of Ada Lovelace, the 19th-century mathematician who was the first to describe how software and hardware could use algorithms to create art (100 years before the first computer was built). Lovelace (daughter of poet Lord Byron) described her work as a kind of “poetical science” that bridged science and literature. Isaacson suggested that Amplify use authors like Lovelace to frame the literary work of *Frankenstein* within the context of the scientific discoveries exploding across the 19th century, to see it as a vision of what might go wrong if we lost control of our own creations.

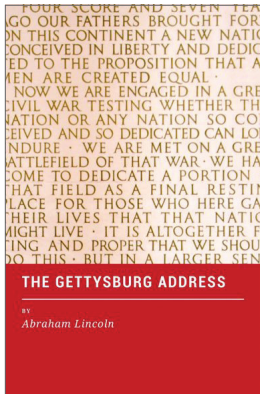
Yet even ideas as compelling as Isaacson's still require a great deal of translation before they can be made to work for middle-schoolers inside of real classrooms. Thus, as deeply as we have committed to bringing in experts who can help us develop wonderful ideas about what a middle school education might look like, we have invested even more seriously in a routine of regular, rigorous, *early* testing in everyday contexts.



Phineas Gage

Through this commitment to student-centered design, we have learned a great deal about which texts really worked for our students, and for which purposes. And because we didn't wait until the entire unit was finished to test parts of it with real students, we were able to use the feedback we received to make real changes. Over and over, our in-classroom testing showed us which texts, which passages, and which ways of engaging with those selections would tap into the motivation that could inspire students to read and reread.

For example, in our early lesson designs for a unit focused on a book about Phineas Gage—an account that explores the history of brain science through the story of a man who survived having an iron rod pass through his skull—we initially asked students to focus on the question that the author poses to the reader: was Phineas lucky? But when we observed the way that students responded to this question in discussion, and, even more important, when we reviewed *the ways they wrote about it*, we discovered that they had little to say. They weren't drawn to focus on the distinctive details in the text



The Gettysburg Address



Romeo and Juliet

that make Fleischman's account different from other accounts of Phineas's story. The students' writing was flat, and they didn't develop the claims they were making. Only when we shifted to questions of what the doctors treating Phineas *misunderstood* about what was happening to him and why—and then to questions about how Fleischman's own melodramatic writing style lured us into our own misunderstandings—did we see evidence of the most animated discussions and the most careful scientific writing.

Similarly, we first tried to teach the Gettysburg Address entirely on its own, without providing students any background information. And we saw students approaching Lincoln's speech like a puzzle, trying to figure out the secret meaning hidden under the challenge of his language. But this out-of-context approach kept them from appreciating what Lincoln was trying to *do*: Because students didn't even know what a "civil war" was, there was no way for them to explore how Lincoln was trying to bring together the different groups that composed his fractured audience. Returning to the drawing board, we developed a sequence of texts that students would read before encountering the Gettysburg Address itself, a sequence that would enable them to understand enough of the situation surrounding the text that they could then tackle the most engaging questions at the heart of it.

By taking time to choose the texts that genuinely interest students and to develop an approach to each text that helps students find the meaning in that text, Amplify ELA has been able to push the limits of text complexity. As a result, some of the sixth- and seventh-grade units, and many of the eighth-grade units, are spent preparing students to make the transition to high school texts. Once in high school, students are suddenly expected to read much more challenging texts and to work with them independently: The complexity of the reading material jumps at the same time that they're supposed to read and write about these texts without any real support. We address this challenge through the use of "stretch texts." In the *Romeo and Juliet* unit, for example, students read a text that's usually reserved for high school curricula—but they do so in a way that's carefully scaffolded to prepare them for the challenges they'll encounter in high school. They don't read the whole play, but instead focus on just five especially compelling selections. As they make their way through the challenges of reading Shakespeare's language, making sense of the play's format, and comprehending a dramatic situation shaped by 400-year-old cultural assumptions, students receive an enormous amount of support. And, as a result, when students encounter a complex text like *Romeo and Juliet* in high school, they'll recognize that they have read this kind of material, and they'll know that they have what it takes to handle it.

Yet, no matter how imaginatively we approached the challenge of selecting texts, our curriculum still includes a number of perfectly traditional readings. Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," for example, have served as mainstays in middle school curricula for a long, long time. The reason for these choices is simple: These readings work. They are as worth reading now as they were a hundred years ago: They engage the imagination (and the delight, and the terror) of young readers just as powerfully as ever they did. They invite students to take a second look, to figure them out, to make their own sense of what they mean and how they do what they do. And, in the rich conversation that follows, they teach our students to become better readers.