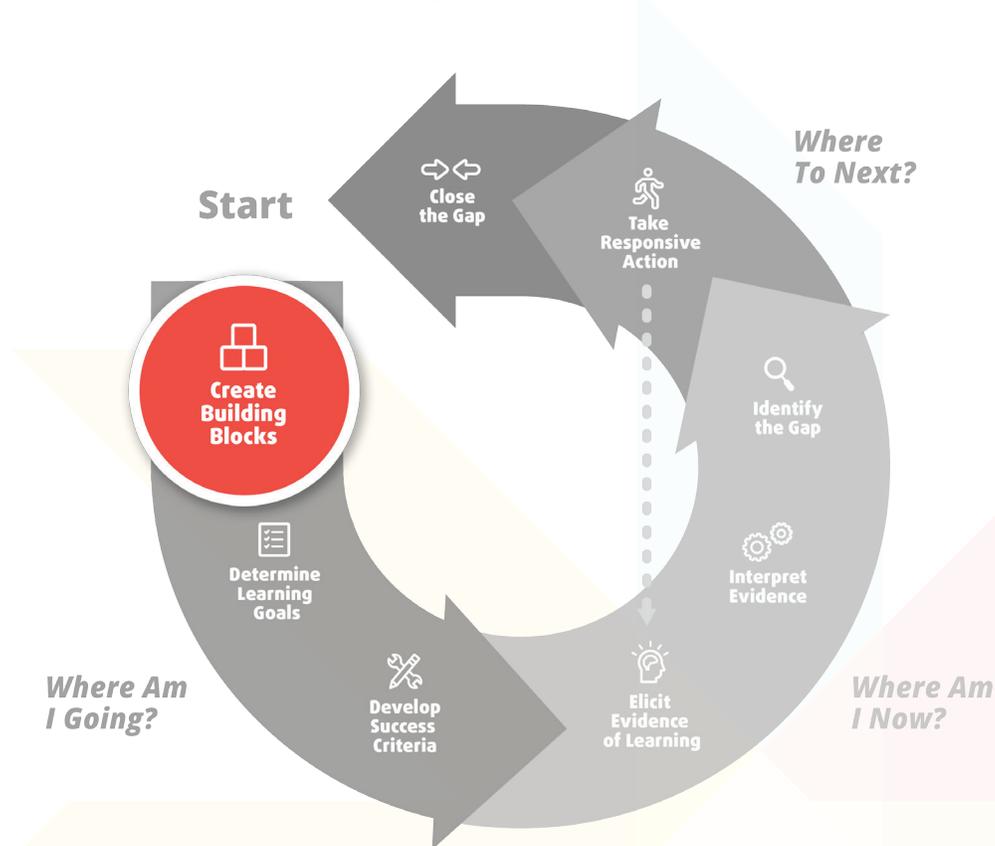# Developing Building Blocks from Standards[1]
Activity 2.11

This reading introduces a process to develop **Building Blocks** from standards. As described in the lesson introduction, Building Blocks describe the *intermediate steps that lead from achievement of one standard to the next*. The process of developing Building Blocks helps teachers think about what is likely to come next in instruction, a fundamental element of formative assessment practice. In this reading we will introduce a process teachers use to develop Building Blocks from standards. Later in the lesson, you will explore how teachers use Building Blocks to develop Learning Goals and Success Criteria—those essential elements in planning formative assessment.

What Are Building Blocks?

College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) specify what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade level. They do not characterize in any detail how student learning progresses from one standard to the next. Because the CCRS are substantive and intended to lead to deep learning, they represent a quantity of learning that is too big for planning daily lessons, and too big for formative assessment. In order to plan instruction and formative assessment, teachers need to

describe the intermediate steps that lead from the achievement of one standard to the next. We refer to these steps as Building Blocks; they characterize the incremental changes that occur in students' thinking or skills as they progress from the end of one grade level to the end of the subsequent grade level. Once teachers have determined the Building Blocks that lead from one standard to the next, they have a pathway of learning to plan coherent instruction and formative assessment. Importantly, Building Blocks will likely need to be refined or revised as teachers use them for their instructional planning and formative assessment, and as they become more familiar with how students learn the standards over time.

Why Are Building Blocks Important in Formative Assessment?

Capturing the right "size" for Learning Goals is important for formative assessment practice. As discussed earlier in this lesson, Learning Goals and Success Criteria are essential in formative assessment planning because: they provide the vehicle through which students come to internalize the learning expectations, they provide a framework for interpreting evidence, and they serve as the basis for subsequent feedback. Building Blocks outline a typical pathway student learning takes as students progress from one standard to the next. As the final component of formative assessment planning, Building Blocks help teachers and students better understand not just what is expected in the learning today, but what are potential next steps in learning. In this way, Building Blocks helps students and teacher consider a key element of formative assessment—"What's next in my learning?"

Video

Moving from Standards to Building Blocks – Part 1: *Olivia Lozano and Gabriella Cardenas, primary teachers in Los Angeles who are experts at formative assessment, talk about Building Blocks. As you watch, listen to how they think about planning lessons using Building Blocks and how these lead to Learning Goals and Success Criteria. (3:57 min.)*
https://goo.gl/lm26wT

A Process for Developing Building Blocks from Standards

As Olivia described in the video clip, Building Blocks are created standard by standard. The process is best done with teachers working together so that they can pool their knowledge, experiences, and expertise. Working together, teachers consider how their students have come to understand a particular standard, and through this discussion come up with a set of "steps," not necessarily linear, that captures teachers' shared understandings of how student learning progresses in that specific standard. Teachers should not expect to simply list the Building Blocks of a standard, in a suitable order, on the first try. The process described below will likely surface comments like, *"Oh wait, we forgot about X... students are going to need to know that before they get to Y,"* or *"Hold on, what do they know about Z from last year?"* For this reason, it is helpful to arrange Building Blocks on post-it notes or in a word processing program, in order to easily insert, delete, and reorder ideas as new concepts emerge.

Though the style and approach towards the development of Building Blocks can look quite different at different grade levels and across subject areas, the one guiding question remains the same for all: *What are the incremental learning steps that students need to take on the pathway to achieving this standard?* The most important consideration in developing Building Blocks is that the list of incremental steps that are outlined in your Building Blocks template captures all the key cognitive steps and skills that you think students will move through as their learning progresses. As Gabriella and Olivia shared in the video, they begin with considering the *prior knowledge of one grade-level's standards* and then consider what is necessary to move to the *new knowledge of the next grade level's standards*.

Guiding Questions for Developing Building Blocks

An effective process for creating Building Blocks involves teacher teams considering these three questions for each standard under review:

#1 - What are the boundaries of prior knowledge?

#2 - How is prior knowledge extended as students learn this standard?

#3 - How do students move beyond the boundaries of prior knowledge to new knowledge?

Let's look at each of these questions in turn.

#1 - What are the boundaries of prior knowledge?

To determine relevant prior knowledge, teachers begin by consulting the previous grade's standards. In some cases, the new standard may build on an earlier standard. For example, the table below shows that Grade 7 ELA standards continue to develop and refine the understanding and skills from the Grade 6 standards.

CCR Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening	Grade 6	Grade 7
1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.	**SL.6.1c.** Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.	**SL.7.1c.** Pose questions that elicit elaborations and respond to others' questions and comments with relevant observations and ideas that bring the discussion back on topic as needed.

In other cases, the standard's content is new to the grade, and teachers will need to scrutinize the previous grade's standards more carefully to determine the conceptual roots of the new standard. Sometimes the standards within a grade build on each other (i.e., there are within-

grade pre-requisite standards). For example, in math CCRS, students in Grade 3 need to "understand concepts of area measurement" before they "relate area to the operations of multiplication and addition."

#2 - How is prior knowledge extended as students learn this standard?

After boundaries of prior knowledge have been identified, the next step is to think about how to extend prior knowledge. In math, Building Blocks that extended prior knowledge might, for example, involve students applying a familiar skill or concept with an increasing level of challenge because of the context in which they are being addressed. For instance, new learning in the Common Core State Standards Math for Grade 3 requires students to "interpret products of whole numbers (e.g., interpret 5 x 7 as the total number of objects in 5 groups of 7 objects each)." Relevant prior knowledge involves being able to "use addition to find the total number of objects arranged in rectangular arrays with up to 5 rows and up to 5 columns and write an equation to express the total as a sum of equal addends." Before being introduced to the concept of multiplication, Grade 3 students can push the boundaries of their Grade 2 knowledge by working with rectangular arrays with more than 5 rows and 5 columns. Similarly, in ELA students could be asked to apply previously learned concepts and skills with an increasing level of text challenge.

#3 - How do students move beyond the boundaries of prior knowledge to new knowledge?

In this last step of the process of developing Building Blocks, teachers determine the new incremental learning steps that students will need to experience in order move beyond their prior knowledge. A Building Block that moves student understanding beyond the boundaries of prior knowledge to new knowledge might involve:

- The introduction of a new concept or skill;
- A new application of an existing concept or skill; or
- A new synthesis of previous learning.

Documenting Team Process - Developing Building Blocks

The process of developing Building Blocks from standards often generates important teacher dialogue about how students learn specific content. The planning template helps teacher teams track and document their findings as they move through Steps 1 through 3 in their planning. The following Building Blocks planning template provides a place to record teacher dialogue as Building Blocks are developed. During the Module 2 application activity, teachers will use this template to record important ideas that emerge as they develop their Building Blocks.

Planning Template

This template is used to capture the many ideas that arise as teachers consider how student understanding develops for each standard. Document Building Blocks as they are discussed, and track other valuable insights in the notes section.

Building Blocks of a Standard

Name: _____ **Grade:** _____ **Year:** _____

Target Standard

Relevant Prior Knowledge

Building Blocks of a Standard	Notes

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An Illustration of the Three-Step Process - Developing Building Blocks from Standards

The following illustration shows how a group of third grade ELA teachers developed a set of Building Blocks from an ELA standard. This illustration includes a review of the process, along with an example of a completed template.

As you review the example, consider how the teachers are thinking about the incremental learning steps that students need to take as they progress towards achieving the standard.

> *Overarching question: What are the incremental learning steps that students need to take on the pathway to achieving this standard?*
>
> *Team discussion questions:*
>
> *(1) What are the boundaries of prior knowledge?*
>
> *(2) How is prior knowledge extended as students learn this standard?*
>
> *(3) How do students move beyond the boundaries of prior knowledge to new knowledge?*

Introduction - Select a Standard for Developing Building Blocks

The third grade team at Granite Elementary School is meeting to establish Building Blocks for several of their ELA standards. In this discussion, they will address RL.3.6. They enter this standard into the template under "Target Standard." They realize that they also need to address related CCR anchor standards, and so they select Anchor Standard 6, focusing on point of view. This begins a discussion, critical as this work is introduced, about what the ultimate learning looks like in this standard. Teachers review the related standards for Grade 4, which help teachers fine-tune their understanding of the Grade 3 expectations.

Step 1. What are the boundaries of prior knowledge?

To get a sense of how learning in this standard builds on knowledge of the previous year, the third grade team begins by reviewing related Grade 2 standards and the CCR Anchor Standard. During this standards review, teachers keep this review focused on their students by discussing what their students already know regarding this standard. They discuss two Grade 2 standards in particular, Standards RL 2.6 and 2.3, and the various ways that students have demonstrated their knowledge of point of view as they begin Grade 3. The team raises several approaches for this, including documenting character's responses to events and using varied voices when reading aloud. The team records standards 2.3 and 2.6 in the template under "Relevant Prior Knowledge."

Step 2. How is prior knowledge extended as students learn this standard?

As teachers consider prior learning in Step 1, there is a natural inclination to discuss how teachers will build on students' prior knowledge as they begin to "stretch" learning towards the target standard. In

this discussion, teachers talk about the ways in which students understand ideas of character. This will be the typical starting point for teachers to help students more fully understand point of view.

The teachers identify three key ideas that they document as the first three Building Blocks in the planning template, each of which is focused on strengthening student understanding regarding character—a key idea in the previous year's standards and one that the teachers identified during Step 1. As they work through this guiding question, the team moves back and forth between their thinking about what students need instructionally (the written notes section) and the building blocks (or how to characterize a particular intermediate step that shows discrete skills or knowledge along the way).

As the team discusses the concept of character, they identify Standard RL.3.3, which focuses on describing characters in a story, which is directly related to their first three Building Blocks. They add this to their list of "Relevant Prior Knowledge."

Step 3. How do students move beyond the boundaries of prior knowledge to new knowledge?

In Step 3, teachers discuss how they move from prior learning to the new end-of-grade expectations. In this example, the teachers discuss how they move students' understanding of what characters do to helping students consider their own point of view, and how students' point of view might be different from the the narrator or characters in the story. To do this, the teachers review different approaches that they use to help students gain awareness of their own perspectives and how individual background knowledge contributes to one's point of view.

The teachers each describe quite different strategies to how they approach this work. Collectively, they are able to identify how these different strategies address different conceptual shifts that students experience as they develop in this area. Though these conceptual shifts get moved around several times through their conversation, in the end they sequence Building Blocks 4 through 8 and enter these into the template.

As the team finishes up this Building Blocks template, they discuss how they are considering smaller "shifts" in student learning as a result of this review of Building Blocks. They agree to come back to this a few times through the year to process this information and to clarify and refine the Building Blocks design they have created.

Example of Completed Planning Template: Building Blocks for Standard ELA RL.3.6

The following illustration shows the completed template, using the 3-step process outlined above.

Building Blocks of a Standard

Name: _____ **Grade:** _____ **Year:** _____

Target Standard

RL.3.6 Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters.
CCR ANCHOR STANDARD 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Relevant Prior Knowledge

RL.2.6 Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud.
RL.2.3 Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
RL.3.3 Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Building Blocks of a Standard	Notes
Block 1 Recognize that characters and narrator can express themselves through different language styles or tones as clues to their point of view.	(Potential challenge to extending prior knowledge) Students may need some direct teaching on how to distinguish tone and voice through specific use of language features.
Block 2 Understand that what characters say and do provide clues as to their points of view.	(Instructional strategy to extend prior knowledge) Ask students to create a T-chart. In one column, students record something that character said or did, and then they make an inference about the character in the other column. Students share their notes with a partner, ask clarifying questions, and add to notes as necessary.

Block 3 Characterize the character and/or narrator point of view in relation to an aspect of the text (e.g., theme, event, moral dilemma).	(Anticipated Challenge) Students may not have a sense of why they have developed the opinions they have about aspects of the text (e.g., events, characters). (Sample Instructional Strategy) Group discussions can help students become more metacognitive in their thinking to develop a better sense of their reasoning, including awareness of the impact their personal experiences and background knowledge have.
Block 5 The reader understands that she has different information than the narrator or character, such as having an overview perspective and that this can inform her point of view.	(Sample Instructional Strategy) Ask students to make a T-chart. In one column students record what the narrator or character knows, and in the other column students record what they know. Students discuss the similarities and differences in information.
Block 6 The reader understands her point of view in relation to aspects of the text (e.g., theme, event, moral dilemma).	(Anticipated Challenge) Students may find it difficult to separate their prior knowledge from what actually takes place in the text.
Block 7 In sections of longer texts or short stories, be able to identify which points of view are being expressed in which sections and one's own point of view in relation to the specific section being read.	(Sample Instructional Strategy) Begin a process to organize and keep track of different points of view (starting with one's own). Students discuss notes in "book clubs" with peers.
Block 8 Consider what has been learned from reading the various sections of the text (Block 1) about different characters' point of view and one's own to generate more holistic conceptions and differentiations of characters' and own points of view. Students develop a consolidated perspective of the various points of view.	(Sample Instructional Strategy) Students use a graphic organizer to keep track of characters' evolving points of view unfolding over the course of the text. Teacher plans paired discussion opportunities and peer feedback.

Summary

Really getting inside a standard to locate its implicit cognitive moves will likely generate valuable insights from teachers. Beyond deepening understanding about the pathways students typically take as they learn new content, breaking down a standard into Building Blocks helps teachers think about:

- Instructional Strategies and Lesson Design;
- Scaffolds and Supports (consider all students, including diverse learners and those in special populations);
- Connections Across Content and Subjects;
- Connections to Real-World Contexts;
- Anticipated Challenges (consider all students, including diverse learners and those in special populations); and
- Shifts in Language (from prior to new learning).

Additional Resources

Tobiason, G., Chang, S., Heritage, M., Jones, B., & Herman, J. (2014). *Building Blocks, learning goals, and success criteria: Planning instruction and formative assessment for K-8 math standards*. Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. Retrieved from http://www.csai-online.org/sites/default/files/resources/3040/BuildingBlocks_v11.pdf

Lozano, M., Mancevice, N., Jones, B., Heritage, M., Chang, S., Tobiason, G., & Herman, J. (2015). *Building blocks, learning goals, and success criteria: Planning instruction and formative assessment for K-12 English language arts and literacy standards.* Los Angeles: University of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. Retrieved from http://www.csai-online.org/sites/default/files/resources/3040/ELA_BuildingBlocksOfCCRS.pdf