



Choosing Quality Classroom Materials for K-12

For learning companies, including content, technology and services providers, delivering an effective education to K-12 students is a shared responsibility. We work with states, districts and individual schools to ensure that teachers and students have access to a wide range of high-quality instructional materials.

Learning companies want administrators and teachers to make an informed decision about the best course materials for their students. Properly vetted OER are one of many affordable options for teachers to consider when choosing instructional materials. In fact, many learning companies support OER by integrating them within their commercial products or offering them as supplemental materials. Our goal is to provide information to help teachers identify the best instructional materials for their classroom.

Identifying OER

Open Educational Resources (OER) are teaching, learning and research materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. The nature of these open materials means that they are released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and anyone can legally copy, use, adapt and re-share them freely without compensating the creator or rights holder.

OER can include courseware (e.g. textbooks, tests, tutorials); learning objects (e.g. supplemental and modular learning resources); and multimedia (e.g. audio, video, online animation) that may reside on diverse technical platforms.

Most OER materials are in the public domain or published under free Creative Commons licenses. These materials are often defined as “free” because they can be freely used, modified and shared by teachers and students and there is no initial cost to purchasing one or more components. However, there are always costs associated with producing, distributing, adopting and updating instructional materials. The initial production of OER is often funded by grants from government or private philanthropies while maintenance is typically up to the school or teacher. In addition, teachers or content enthusiasts often create OER materials for sale or for sharing with like-minded educators over online marketplaces.

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Benchmarking Quality Instructional Materials

Professional standards of quality and consistency should be the baseline for all instructional resources. Quality benchmarks include:

- Clearly articulated learning goals and objectives
- Appropriate grade and reading levels
- Clearly stated reputable sources
- Engaging, relevant, and up-to-date content
- Highly vetted content that is accurate, objective, and reliable
- Differentiated learning opportunities
- Standards and evidence-based lessons/learning aligned with high-quality assessments
- Well-designed and attractive materials for students, teachers, and other education professionals
- Accessible and adaptable materials for individual learning styles and needs
- Comprehensive teacher guide or instructional support materials

Students using materials that do not meet quality standards – whether OER or commercially developed – are at a disadvantage. In the K-12 setting, materials alignment with state academic standards is required by law for all materials so teachers seeking to use OER materials should ensure such materials are aligned with a particular state's standards or certifications where necessary.

Because of state and local adoption requirements and educator expectations, commercially produced course materials are often based on high-quality research, aligned to state standards, updated regularly and created to be engaging and accessible for all students and faculty/instructors. These materials are frequently selected by administrators and teachers because they are proven effective in the classroom.

When selecting course materials – whether OER, commercially developed or a combination of the two – administrators and teachers should consider using the following checklist to ensure materials will meet their learners' needs.

Quality Assurance Checklist for Instructional Materials

In order to ensure the quality of their materials, learning resource creators should employ a rigorous product development process focused on the needs of the learner. Obtaining answers to the following questions may help you determine the highest quality materials for your use.

1

How was content determined?

- Did content creator consult state curriculum committees, authors, digital media experts, independent experts/reviewers, national standards organizations, national advisory groups?
- Did content creator study an established research base and new research findings?
- Is there a plan for customized correlations to state standards?

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2

Research & planning for quality

- Were content experts identified?
- Were educators surveyed?
- Did the content creator develop and produce a prototype?
- Was the prototype reviewed with authors, digital media experts and educators?
- Was the development plan revised to reflect input from content authors, digital media experts and educators?
- Was the prototype revised and retested?

3

How was early product development handled?

- Did the development team include authors, content experts, graphic artists, digital media developers and other specialists?
- Did development team create customized correlations to state standards?
- Did authors, digital media developers and content area experts create and evaluate first draft?
- Are teacher editions/interface and ancillary materials created at the development stage?

4

How was initial editing and review process conducted?

- Did the publisher document all facts from at least two independent sources?
- Was content reviewed for accuracy and usability (for digital materials) by academic reviewers, independent readers, evaluators, master teachers, digital media developers and instructional designers?
- Was content copy edited, fact-checked and proofread?
- Were changes from authors, editors, digital media developers and reviewers incorporated into the initial product?
- Was a first printing or beta test (digital materials) sent to teachers and students for their feedback?

5

Were quality reviews of beta test or first printing conducted?

- Were student and teacher editions sent to independent reviewers for complete content read and to test usability (for digital materials)?
- Were comments solicited from teachers and state review committees?
- Did the publisher and/or author(s) research and verify accuracy of error reports through independent content authorities?
- Were any errors or technical issues corrected and tested?

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6

Are there continuing quality reviews?

- Is there a process to receive and review comments from students, teachers, academics and review committees?
- Are text, photographs, charts & graphs, art and digital interfaces corrected for errors or clarifications?
- How are errata/updates distributed if errors are found?

7

Are subsequent editions/versions forthcoming?

- What is the process for determining if a subsequent edition or revised version will be produced?
- Are authors, developers and editors aware of public comments on the material? Are they involved in decision to revise material?
- Is the process for creating revised materials as rigorous as for initial materials?

8

Do the materials include copyrighted works from photographers, artists or authors?

- If the materials include photographs, graphic illustrations or text that may not be in the public domain and subject to copyright, have rights and permissions been secured to ensure use of the material does not infringe upon the rights of others?

Choosing Instructional Materials for Your School or Classroom

When considering print, digital, visual or web-based instructional materials, teachers and administrators should determine whether content is up-to-date and meets state/district curriculum standards and learning goals and addresses the different cultural backgrounds of today's students.

To deliver the quality that teachers expect, educators try to select instructional materials that have developmentally appropriate reading levels, language and exercises, differentiated lessons for the various ability levels, comprehensive teacher guides, qualitative and quantitative assessment, and high-level learning goals. There are clear benefits to selecting materials that are evidence-based, objective driven, and designed to engage both students and teachers.

Determining The Best Choice

Administrators and teachers are under constant pressure from taxpayers, parents and students to reduce educational costs. While freely acquired OER may be attractive it is not the only affordable option. Educators should consider a variety of factors, including price, quality, format, accessibility, availability of updates, and ability to meet the needs of a diverse student population when determining which materials are the best option for their classroom.