

Rigor in the Standards- Conceptual Understanding

Handout, Grades 3-5

Rigor in the Standards

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“To help students meet the expectations of the Standards, educators will need to pursue, with equal intensity, three aspects of rigor in the major work of each grade: conceptual understanding, procedural skill and fluency, and applications. The word *understand* is used in the Standards to set explicit expectations for conceptual understanding, the word “*fluently*” is used to set explicit expectations for fluency, and the phrase “*real-world problems*” and the star symbol (*) is used to set expectations and flag opportunities for applications and modeling (which is a Standard for Mathematical Practice as well as a content category in High School).” —*K–8 Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*

At UnboundEd, we’ve studied the state standards, spent time in classrooms, and looked at work done by other organizations to form an understanding of these three aspects of rigor that we think is most useful for educators to understand the standards and shift their practice. So while the words *understand*, *fluently*, and *real-world problems* do indicate the three aspects of rigor, they are not comprehensive. We’ve come to associate conceptual understanding with higher order thinking skills, working with multiple representations, and teaching more than just computational procedures. Procedural skills are about students accurately performing core functions required for grade-level mathematics; fluency is explicitly called for in certain standards and implies efficiency. Application can be thought of generally as problem solving, in real-world or mathematical contexts. For example, the words *recognize* or *compare* can be used to indicate conceptual understanding, *count* can indicate procedural skill and fluency, and *solve addition and subtraction word problems* can be used to indicate application. Nevertheless, the example standards that indicate an aspect of rigor should be used as examples and are not meant to be a checklist or keyword indicators.

Additional Aspects of the Rigor and Balance Criterion from the *K–8 Publishers’ Criteria*:

- (1) The three aspects of rigor are not always separate in materials. (Conceptual understanding needs to underpin fluency work; fluency can be practiced in the context of applications; and applications can build conceptual understanding.)
- (2) Nor are the three aspects of rigor always together in materials. (Fluency requires dedicated practice to that end. Rich applications cannot always

be shoehorned into the mathematical topic of the day. And conceptual understanding will not come along for free but must be explicitly taught.)

Conceptual Understanding

“Developing students’ conceptual understanding of key mathematical concepts, where called for in specific content standards or cluster headings. Materials amply feature high-quality conceptual problems and questions that can serve as fertile conversation starters in a classroom if students are unable to answer them. This includes brief conceptual problems with low computational difficulty (e.g., ‘Find a number greater than $\frac{1}{5}$ and less than $\frac{1}{4}$ ’); brief conceptual questions (e.g., ‘If the divisor does not change and the dividend increases, what happens to the quotient?’); and problems that involve identifying correspondences across different mathematical representations of quantitative relationships. In the materials, conceptual understanding is not a generalized imperative applied with a broad brush, but is attended to most thoroughly in those places in the content standards where explicit expectations are set for *understanding* or *interpreting*. Such problems and activities include fine-grained mathematical concepts, such as place value, the whole-number product $a \times b$, the fraction $\frac{a}{b}$, the fraction product $(a/b) \times q$, expressions as records of calculations, solving equations as a process of answering a question, etc. (Conceptual understanding of key mathematical concepts is thus distinct from applications or fluency work, and these three aspects of rigor must be balanced as indicated in the Standards.)” —***K–8 Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics***

The *K–8 Publishers’ Criteria* sets expectations for materials to reflect the appropriate aspect of rigor called for in the Standards. In order to ensure instruction reflects the appropriate aspect of rigor, first we must unpack what rigor looks like in the standards and how instruction might reflect this aspect of rigor. The table below identifies the main goal and effective instructional strategies for building conceptual understanding.

Conceptual Understanding

Main goals:	Effective instructional strategies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduce concepts. ● Emphasize sensemaking instead of answer-getting. ● Uncover and unscramble common misconceptions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discussion and reflection: Students build their own understanding through experience, discussion, explaining, justifying, and/or reflection; teacher facilitates through questioning and making connections. ○ Manipulatives and visual models: Deepen knowledge of concepts before moving to abstract representations. ○ Multiple representations: Provide opportunities for students to experience and work between different representations of the same content (e.g., table, graph). ○ Error analysis: Target common misconceptions by determining if a mistake exists; explain the mistake.

Source: **Achievement Network**

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5321dc4ae4b0c72ad0ceedfe/t/59c4179537c5811bd8d9000c/1506023318140/Instructional+Approaches+for+Math+Rigor.pdf>

Retrieved Nov. 9, 2018

The examples below are standards within grades 3–5 that indicate conceptual understanding. Each example provided highlights language in the standard that indicates the aspect of rigor, rationale for why this standard indicates the aspect of rigor, other standards that similarly reflect the aspect of rigor in this grade band, and additional information that helps to articulate the nuance of the Standards and helps to paint a more complete picture of the aspect of rigor for this grade band. Language in the standard that reflects a different aspect of rigor than the one being highlighted has been *grayed*.

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:

Understand and Represent

3.NF.A.2 **Understand** a fraction as a number on the number line; **represent** fractions on a number line diagram.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor in multiple ways. In 3.NF.A.2, students must understand fractions as numbers on the number line and represent fractions on a number line; the standard explicitly names understanding, along with use of a visual representation.

Standards:

3.OA.B.6, 3.NF.A.1, 3.NF.A.3.A, 3.MD.C.5, 4.NF.B.3.A, 4.NF.B.4.A, 4.NF.B.4.B

More to know:

3.NF.A.2.A and 3.NF.A.2.B both address conceptual understanding because students represent fractions on a number line, including defining the interval that is the whole and partitioning it into equal parts and understanding the fractional size of each part, in support of conceptually understand fractions as numbers.

3.OA.D.8 indicates both conceptual understanding and application. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:

- 3.OA.D.8 *Solve two-step word problems using the four operations. **Represent** these problems using equations with a letter standing for the unknown quantity. Assess the reasonableness of answers using mental computation and estimation strategies including rounding.*

Students have to be able to apply their understanding of the four operations when solving word problems that require them to represent the context using equations with a variable for the unknown and assess the reasonableness of their answers using mental strategies and estimation.

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:	
<p>Recognize 5.NBT.A.1 Recognize that in a multi-digit number, a digit in one place represents 10 times as much as it represents in the place to its right and 1/10 of what it represents in the place to its left.</p>	
Rationale:	Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because recognizing relationships based on place value depends securely on deep understanding of the place value system. 5.NBT.A.1 requires students to recognize the unique relationship a digit has to its place and the base-ten system, noticing that the value of the digit decreases by a magnitude of 10 as the digit moves to the place to its right within the multi-digit number.
Standards:	3.MD.C.5, 4.NBT.A.1, 5.MD.C.5.C, 3.NF.B.3.B
More to know:	<p>3.MD.C.5 indicates conceptual understanding in multiple ways. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.MD.C.5 Recognize area as an attribute of plane figures and understand concepts of area measurement. <p>Students extend understanding of plane figures to include the concept of area and that the area of a plane figure can be measured.</p> <p>5.MD.C.5.C indicates conceptual understanding, procedural skills and fluency, and application. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5.MD.C.5.C Recognize volume as additive. <i>Find volumes of solid figures composed of two non-overlapping right rectangular prisms by adding the volumes of the non-overlapping parts, applying this technique to solve real world problems.</i> <p>Procedural skills are indicated in the standard in students using a procedure (adding volumes of non-overlapping parts) to find the volume of solid figures. Application is called out in the standard specifically in using this procedure to find volumes of solid figures when solving real world problems.</p>

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:

Interpret

3.OA.A.2 **Interpret** whole-number quotients of whole numbers, e.g., **interpret** $56 \div 8$ as the number of objects in each share when 56 objects are partitioned equally into 8 shares, or as a number of shares when 56 objects are partitioned into equal shares of 8 objects each. For example, describe a context in which a number of shares or a number of groups can be expressed as $56 \div 8$.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because interpreting quotients, when compared with finding or calculating quotients, indicates higher order thinking that must involve deep understanding of division. In 3.OA.A.2, students have to be able to interpret how a whole number is divided into equal shares or the number of groups created when sharing. Students build their understanding through explaining problem contexts where they are interpreting quotients of whole numbers.

Standards:

3.OA.A.1, 4.OA.A.1, 5.OA.A.2, 5.NF.B.3, 5.NF.B.4.A

More to know:

5.NF.B.3 indicates both conceptual understanding and application. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:

- 5.NF.B.3 **Interpret** a fraction as division of the numerator by the denominator ($a/b = a \div b$). *Solve word problems involving division of whole numbers leading to answers in the form of fractions or mixed numbers, e.g., by using visual fraction models or equations to represent the problem. For example, interpret $3/4$ as the result of dividing 3 by 4, noting that $3/4$ multiplied by 4 equals 3, and that when 3 wholes are shared equally among 4 people each person has a share of size $3/4$. If 9 people want to share a 50-pound sack of rice equally by weight, how many pounds of rice should each person get? Between what two whole numbers does your answer lie?*

The application aspect of rigor is indicated through the standard’s description of “solving word problems involving division of whole numbers.”

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:

Compare

5.NBT.A.3.B **Compare** two decimals to thousandths **based on meanings** of the digits in each place, using $>$, $=$, and $<$ symbols to record the results of comparisons.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because students have to be able understand the place value system. In 5.NBT.A.3.B, students use understanding of how place value gives a digit its value in order to make comparisons. Additionally, the standard specifically mentions comparing “based on meanings,” which implies that students must logically justify their comparisons, which requires higher order thinking beyond computation or procedural methods.

Standards:

3.NF.A.3.D, 4.NF.A.2, 4.NF.C.7, 5.NF.B.5.A

More to know:

3.NF.A.3.D indicates conceptual understanding in multiple ways. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:

- 3.NF.A.3.D **Compare** two fractions with the same numerator or the same denominator by reasoning about their size. **Recognize** that comparisons are valid only when the two fractions refer to the same whole. Record the results of comparisons with the symbols $>$, $=$, or $<$, and **justify the conclusions, e.g. by using a visual fraction model.**

4.NF.A.2 also indicates conceptual understanding in multiple ways and is similar to 3.NF.A.3.D in that it indicates conceptual understanding through comparison, recognizing the validity of comparisons, and justifying the conclusion of the comparison. Students in grade 3 are developing an understanding of fractions as numbers, and students in grade 4 are extending their understanding of fraction equivalence and ordering.

Language of the standards that indicate conceptual understanding

Explain

4.NF.A.1 **Explain** why a fraction a/b is equivalent to a fraction $(n \times a)/(n \times b)$ by using visual fraction models, with attention to how the number and size of the parts differ even though the two fractions themselves are the same size. Use this principle to recognize and generate equivalent fractions.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because deep understanding is required for students to be able to explain fraction equivalence; this standard moves beyond mere computation or identification of equivalent fractions. Students have to be able to visually represent the equivalent fractions and specify the differences amongst the parts in order to explain why the fractions are equivalent.

Standards:

3.NF.A.3, 5.NBT.A.2

More to know:

5.NF.B.5.B indicates conceptual understanding in multiple ways. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:

- 5.NF.B.5.B: **Explaining** why multiplying a given number by a fraction greater than 1 results in a product greater than the given number (recognizing multiplication by whole numbers greater than 1 as a familiar case); **explaining** why multiplying a given number by a fraction less than 1 results in a product smaller than the given number; and **relating the principle of fraction equivalence** $a/b = (n \times a)/(n \times b)$ **to the effect of multiplying** a/b by 1.

In 5.NF.B.5, students interpret multiplication as scaling by extending their previous understandings of multiplication and division to multiply and divide fractions. Beyond this interpreting and explaining, students explain why multiplying a given number by a fraction greater than 1 results in a product greater than the given number and explain why multiplying a given number by a fraction less than 1 results in a product smaller than the given number.

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:

Relate

3.MD.C.7 **Relate** area to the operations of multiplication and addition.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because, in contrast to just computing products or sums, students need deeper understanding to be able to connect the concept of area to these operations. Students extend their understanding of these operations in order to relate them to area.

Standards:

5.MD.C.5

More to know:

5.MD.C.5 indicates both conceptual understanding and application. Conceptual understanding is indicated in the standard by the language:

- 5.MD.C.5: **Relate** *volume to the operations of multiplication and addition and solve real world and mathematical problems involving volume.*

In 5.MD.C.5 students apply their understanding of volume and its relationship to the multiplication and addition to solve real-world and mathematical problems.

Language of the standards that indicates conceptual understanding:

4.NBT.A.3 **Use place value understanding to round** multi-digit whole numbers, less than or equal to 1,000,000, to any place.

Rationale:

Addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because understanding the place value system is explicitly named in the standard. In 4.NBT.A.3, students generalize their place value understanding when rounding multi-digit whole numbers.

Standards:

5.NBT.A.4, 3.NBT.A.1

More to know:

3.NBT.A.1 is considered Additional work, but it is foundational for the two rounding standards in grades 4 and 5, both of which are Major work.

Rigor in the Standards- Application

Handout, Grades 3-5

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Application

“Allowing teachers and students using the materials as designed to spend sufficient time working with engaging applications, without losing focus on the major work of each grade. Materials in grades K–8 include an ample number of single-step and multi-step contextual problems that develop the mathematics of the grade, afford opportunities for practice, and engage students in problem solving. Materials for grades 6–8 also include problems in which students must make their own assumptions or simplifications in order to model a situation mathematically. Applications take the form of problems to be worked on individually as well as classroom activities centered on application scenarios. Materials attend thoroughly to those places in the content standards where expectations for multi-step and real-world problems are explicit. Applications in the materials draw only on content knowledge and skills specified in the content standards, with particular stress on applying major work and a preference for the more fundamental techniques from additional and supporting work. Modeling builds slowly across K–8, and applications are relatively simple in earlier grades. Problems and activities are grade-level appropriate, with a sensible tradeoff between the sophistication of the problem and the difficulty or newness of the content knowledge the student is expected to bring to bear.” —*K–8 Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*

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Application	
Main goals:	Effective instructional strategies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apply skills and understandings to new situations, other subject areas, real-world and problem-solving situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Problem-solving opportunities: Provide time for student to work on tasks independently, with a partner, or in small groups with consistent teacher feedback. ○ Share multiple solution methods: Facilitate classroom discussions where students share, explain, and justify a variety of problem solving strategies and/or solutions. ○ Intentionally integrate content: Provide learning opportunities for students to apply their knowledge of multiple standards, clusters, or domains.
<p>Source: Achievement Network https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5321dc4ae4b0c72ad0ceedfe/t/59c4179537c5811bd8d9000c/1506023318140/Instructional+Approaches+for+Math+Rigor.pdf Retrieved Nov. 9, 2018</p>	

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Language of the standards that indicates application:	
3.OA.A.3 Use multiplication and division within 100 to solve word problems in situations involving equal groups, arrays, and measurement quantities, e.g., by using drawings and equations with a symbol for the unknown number to represent the problem.	
Rationale:	<p>Addresses the application aspect of rigor because students have to be able to apply what they know about multiplication and division to solve problems. This application is rooted in students' understanding of multiplication and division, and is called out in the standard by the use of drawings and equations with a symbol for the unknown to represent the problems.</p> <p>Note that 3.OA.A.3 includes explicit reference to its roots in conceptual understanding because mention of work with multiple representations is included; students use drawings and equations with a symbol for the unknown to represent the problem.</p>
Standards:	3. OA.D.8, 4.OA.A.2, 4.OA.A.3, 4.NF.B.4.C, 5.NF.B.6, 5.NF.B.7.C
Additional info:	<p>3. OA.D.8 indicates application. The language in the standard that indicates the application aspect of rigor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3:OA.D.8: <i>Solve two-step word problems using the four operations. Represent these problems using equations with a letter standing for the unknown quantity. Assess the reasonableness of answers using mental computation and estimation strategies including rounding.</i> <p>3.OA.D.8 and 4.OA.A.3 indicate the application aspect of rigor because students solve multi-step word problems using the four operations. These applications are rooted in students' understanding of the four operations, and is called out in the standard by representing these problems with a letter for the unknown, and assessing the reasonableness of answers using mental computation and estimation strategies including rounding.</p> <p>It is imperative that students have experiences with the appropriate kinds of word problems for their grade level. Table 2 of the Glossary of the Standards describes the types of multiplication and division word problems that students must engage with, as described in standards 3.OA.A.3 and 4.OA.A.2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3.OA.A.3: <i>Use multiplication and division within 100 to solve word problems in situations involving equal groups, arrays, and measurement quantities, e.g., by using drawings and equations with a symbol for the unknown</i>

number to represent the problem.

- *4.OA.A.2: Multiply or divide to **solve word problems** involving multiplicative comparison, e.g., by using drawings and equations with a symbol for the unknown number to represent the problem, distinguishing multiplicative comparison from additive comparison.*

Rigor in the Standards- Procedural Skills and Fluency

Handout, Grades 3-5

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Procedural Skills and Fluency

“Giving attention throughout the year to individual standards that set an expectation of fluency. The Standards are explicit where fluency is expected. Materials in grades K–6 help students make steady progress throughout the year toward fluent (accurate and reasonably fast) computation, including knowing single-digit products and sums from memory (see, e.g., 2.OA.B.2 and 3.OA.C.7). Progress toward these goals is interwoven with students’ developing conceptual understanding of the operations in question. Manipulatives and concrete representations such as diagrams that enhance conceptual understanding are closely connected to the written and symbolic methods to which they refer (see, e.g., 1.NBT). As well, purely procedural problems and exercises are present. These include cases in which opportunistic strategies are valuable—e.g., the sum $698 + 240$ or the system $x + y = 1$, $2x + 2y = 3$ —as well as an ample number of generic cases so that students can learn and practice efficient algorithms (e.g., the sum $8767 + 2286$). Methods and algorithms are general and based on principles of mathematics, not mnemonics or tricks. Materials do not make fluency a generalized imperative to be applied with a broad brush, but attend most thoroughly to those places in the content standards where explicit expectations are set for fluency. In higher grades, algebra is the language of much of mathematics. Like learning any language, we learn by using it. Sufficient practice with algebraic operations is provided so as to make realistic the attainment of the Standards as a whole; for example, fluency in algebra can help students get past the need to manage computational details so that they can observe structure (MP.7) and express regularity in repeated reasoning (MP.8).” —*K–8 Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics*

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Procedural Skills and Fluency

Main goals:	Effective instructional strategies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learn or develop algorithms. ● Execute procedures accurately and efficiently. ● Learn how to use models or tools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Connect procedures to conceptual understanding: Link algorithms to concepts, help students understand the “why” behind the procedure. ○ Explicit instruction: I Do, We Do, You Do, teacher “Think Aloud,” or teacher modeling. ○ Practice: Spiraled or distributed practice with consistent teacher feedback to lead to fluency.

Source: **Achievement Network**

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5321dc4ae4b0c72ad0ceedfe/t/59c4179537c5811bd8d9000c/1506023318140/Instructional+Approaches+for+Math+Rigor.pdf>

Retrieved Nov. 9, 2018

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Language of the standards that indicates procedural skill and fluency:

3.OA.C.7 Fluently multiply and divide within 100, using strategies such as the relationship between multiplication and division (e.g., knowing that $8 \times 5 = 40$, one knows $40 \div 5 = 8$) or properties of operations. By the end of Grade 3, **know from memory all products of two one-digit numbers**.

Rationale: Addresses the procedural skill and fluency aspect of rigor because fluency is specifically called out in the standard. In 3.OA.C.7 students fluently multiply and divide within 100, students must also memorize the products of two one-digit numbers. The use of strategies such as the relationship between multiplication and division or properties of operations to fluently multiply and divide is rooted in students' understanding of multiplication and division.

Standards: 4.NBT.B.4, 5.NBT.B.5

More to know: In 5.NBT.B.7, fluency is not directly called out. However, this standard indicates procedural skill and is rooted in conceptual understanding similarly to 3.OA.C.7 in the use of strategies including the relationship between operations and properties of operations to support computation. The language in the standard that indicates procedural skill and fluency:

- 5.NBT.B.7: **Add, subtract, multiply, and divide decimals to hundredths**, using concrete models or drawings and strategies based on place value, properties of operations, and/or the relationship between addition and subtraction; relate the strategy to a written method and explain the reasoning used.

Students perform operations with multi-digit whole numbers and with decimals to hundredths indicating procedural skill. This standard also addresses the conceptual understanding aspect of rigor because students use concrete models or drawings and strategies based on place value and properties of operations as strategies to support their computation. They also relate these strategies to a written method and explain the reasoning used.

Language of the standards that indicates procedural skills and fluency:

4.NF.C.5 **Express** a fraction with denominator 10 as an equivalent fraction with denominator 100, and use this technique to add two fractions with respective denominators 10 and 100. For example, express $\frac{3}{10}$ as $\frac{30}{100}$, and add $\frac{3}{10} + \frac{4}{100} = \frac{34}{100}$.

Rationale:	Addresses the procedural skills and fluency aspect of rigor because students have to use a procedure efficiently to meet the benchmark of the standard. In 4.NF.C.5, students create equivalent fractions when the denominator is 10 or 100, then add the two fractions after making common denominators. Creating equivalent fractions is rooted in students' understanding of fractions as numbers.
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Standards:	3.NF.A.3.C, 4.MD.A.1
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More to know:	<p>3.NF.A.3.C indicates procedural skill and fluency and conceptual understanding. The language in the standards that indicates procedural skill and fluency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3.NF.A.3.C: Express whole numbers as fractions, and recognize fractions that are equivalent to whole numbers. <i>Examples: Express 3 in the form $3 = \frac{3}{1}$; recognize that $\frac{6}{1} = 6$; locate $\frac{4}{4}$ and 1 at the same point of a number line diagram.</i> <p>3.NF.A.3.C indicates conceptual understanding by requiring students to recognize fractions that are equivalent to whole numbers. The implication here is that the recognition occurs with automaticity, through the work of the standard.</p>
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Language of the standards that indicates procedural skill and fluency:	
3.MD.C.6 Measure areas by counting unit squares (square cm, square m, square in, square ft, and improvised units.)	
Rationale:	Addresses the procedural skills and fluency aspect of rigor because it requires students to perform mathematical procedures: measuring and counting. In 3.MD.C.6, students use the procedural skill of counting, decomposing, and recomposing unit squares in order to measure the area of figures.
Standards:	3.MD.A.2, 5.MD.C.4
More to know:	<p>3.MD.A.2 indicates conceptual understanding, procedural skill in fluency, and application. The language in the standard that indicates procedural skill and fluency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.MD.A.2: Measure and estimate liquid volumes and masses of objects using standard units of grams (g), kilograms (kg), and liters (l). Add, subtract, multiply, or divide to solve one-step word problems involving masses or volumes that are given in the same units, e.g., by using drawings (such as a beaker with a measurement scale) to represent the problem. <p>Conceptual understanding is indicated in 3.MD.A.2 in students estimating liquid volumes and masses, and in the use of drawings to represent the problem; these indicate higher order thinking and use of multiple representations. Application is indicated in the standard in students solving one-step word problems.</p>