

Understanding Text Complexity

In their article “A Discussion of ‘Increasing Text Complexity’” (2004), authors Karin Hess and Sue Biggam explain that “students learn to apply and practice a variety of reading strategies, for different purposes and with different text types. Over time, students who are exposed to a variety of text types with increasing complexity also learn how text features differ by genre, and they gain confidence in peeling back the layers of complexity for a deeper understanding of what is read” (p. 1).

One of the key aspects of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is its emphasis on text complexity. This comes as a direct response to research that shows that when today’s student graduates, he or she will be required to read more complex materials than ever before. On the other hand, the texts that students have been reading have become less and less sophisticated, and requirements for independent reading have decreased. As a result, students are being shortchanged, and they are reading at too low a level. Mark Bauerlein explains it well in his article “Too Dumb for Complex Texts?” (February, 2011), “When faced with a U.S. Supreme Court decision, an epic poem, or an ethical treatise—works characterized by dense meanings, elaborate structure, sophisticated vocabulary, and subtle authorial intentions—college-ready students plod through them. Unready students falter” (p. 28). By steadily increasing text complexity for students as they progress through their school years, students should be better prepared for college and career.

Naturally, this starts small. In grades K–2, the emphasis is on the role of reading itself as early readers learn to read, use some comprehension strategies, and then respond to what they read through writing, speaking, listening, and language. In grades 3–12, there is a shift of the “focus of literacy instruction to center on careful examination of the text itself...The standards focus intently on students reading

closely to draw evidence from the text and are emphatic about students reading texts of adequate range and complexity” (Coleman & Pimental, 2011, p. 1).

What Makes a Text Complex?

Simply put, the ability to gain knowledge is directly related to our ability to understand what we read. Therefore, to increase student knowledge, we’ve got to increase what, and how much, our students are reading. And in a changing world, where written text and various types of media compete for student attention, students need even more critical thinking skills with which to approach any text.

According to M. J. Adams, as quoted in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards, “To grow, our students must read lots, and more specifically they must read lots of ‘complex’ texts—texts that offer them new language, new knowledge, and new modes of thought” (CCSSI, 2010, p. 4).

According to the Standards, three different elements work together to determine a text’s complexity—qualitative aspects of the text, quantitative elements of the text, and matching readers to appropriate texts.

The English Language Arts Appendix A document details the research that supports the key elements of the standards. You will see several references to this document in this reading. To refer to the document click on this link:

http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf

Qualitative Dimensions

Qualitative dimensions refer to aspects of text complexity “best measured or only measurable by an attentive human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose; structure; language conventionality and clarity; and knowledge demands.” (CCSSI Appendix A, 2010, p. 4)

Researchers have determined four qualitative factors for evaluating the complexity of texts. This simply means that these are aspects (or qualities) of the text that readers can determine.

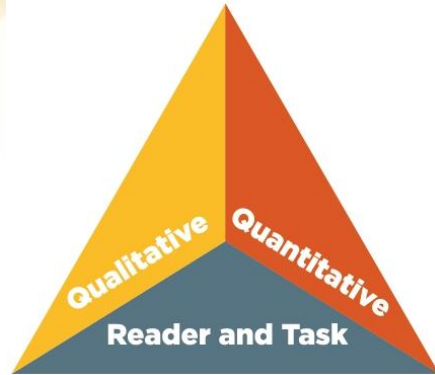
- **The levels of meaning or purpose in a text**—Why was this written? Is there one meaning or more than one? Is the purpose obvious or hidden?
- **The text’s structure**—Is the structure simple or complex? Is it conventional or unconventional? Does it have certain genre traits or discipline traits that are new to students? Is the text accompanied by graphics?
- **Language conventions and clarity**—Does the text contain literal or figurative language? Is the language clear or is it purposely unclear? Does the text use contemporary language or language that is unfamiliar to the reader?
- **Knowledge demands on the reader**—Are the themes or main ideas simple or complicated? Is there more than one theme or main idea? How many perspectives are represented in the text? Are the perspectives similar to or different from the reader’s? Is cultural knowledge necessary to understand the text? Does the text refer to other texts that the reader should have read? Is specific disciplinary knowledge needed for understanding?

Figure 2 of Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards (located on page 6) represents the differences between noncomplex and complex texts within the different knowledge strands of literacy. Take some time to look at it as you consider text choices for your students.

Quantitative Dimensions

Quantitative dimensions and factors refer to “those aspects of text complexity, such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult if not impossible for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, especially in long texts, and are thus today typically measured by computer software” (CCSSI Appendix A, 2010, p. 4).

Researchers have developed a variety of tools that calculate and measure the readability of texts based on elements such as vocabulary, sentence structure and length, word frequency, and so on, including the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Scale,



From *CCSSI Appendix A*, 2010, p. 4

Dale-Chall Readability Formula, and the Lexile Framework. These tools analyze and indicate an estimated grade-level for a text.

The CCSS have developed text complexity grade bands and connected them to Lexile ranges. These new Lexile ranges are higher than those that have been used in the past. For example, where the old Lexile ranges for

Grades 4–5 fell between 645 and 684, the new ranges are between 770 and 798.

Take a peek at Figure 3 on page 8 of Appendix A to see specific ranges for each grade band.

Reader and Task

While qualitative and quantities dimensions focus on the inherent complexity of text, “variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject” (CCSSI Appendix A, 2010, p. 4).

This element is based largely on the professional judgment of teachers who match certain readers with certain texts. Teachers consider a student’s

- Reading level and other cognitive abilities.
- Motivation levels.
- Background knowledge.
- Personal experiences.

How the Common Core Helps

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to help teachers reach the goal of using increasingly complex texts in the classroom. You can use the CCSS to determine which types of texts are appropriate for your students. The Standards provide examples of the different types of texts. In all the grades, literature texts include stories, drama, and poetry. Informational texts in grades K–5 include literary nonfiction and historical, scientific, and technical texts. Informational texts in grades 6–12 include literary nonfiction.

The Standards provide grade-specific text complexity requirements. These complexity requirements are spelled out in Figure 4 on page 10 of Appendix A. Essentially, text complexity is defined in grades or grade bands. By the end of the year, students should read and understand proficiently texts that fall within these ranges. Teachers should provide appropriate scaffolding to support student needs. For example, in kindergarten, the complexity demands are that students “actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.” In grade 4, students “read and comprehend literature and informational texts in the grades 4–5 text complexity band.” By the end of 10th grade, students “read and comprehend literature, informational texts, history/social studies texts, science and technical texts at the high end of the grades 9–10 complexity band” (CCSSI, 2010, p. 10).

The CCSS even provide examples of specific texts you might use, based on each grade level. For example, an informational text in Grades 2–3 might be *A Drop of Water: A Book of Science and Wonder* by Walter Wick (1997). A literary nonfiction text for grades 9–10 might include the “Gettysburg Address” by Abraham Lincoln.

Selecting and Using Complex Texts

Here are a few tips that can help you select and use complex texts as you seek to help students meet the Common Core State Standards. These tips are adapted

from the “Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy” by David Coleman and Susan Pimental (2011). You can use the tips to help you select texts, design questions, and develop tasks.

Choosing Texts	Designing Text-Based Questions and Tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select texts that align with complexity requirements stated in the Standards. • Use texts that are worth reading and re-reading; they should show excellent craft or provide useful information. • Increase the amount of literary nonfiction and informational text for all grades. • Provide additional materials for independent student reading. • Select texts that provide research opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give students opportunities to read and understand grade-level complex texts. • Begin with the text in prereading. • Base questions on the text. • Ask questions that are worth thinking about. • Require textual evidence in answering questions or performing tasks. • Incorporate group and individual instruction. • Provide activities that help improve student understanding of academic vocabulary needed to understand complex texts. • Focus on analyzing arguments and information in texts.