Text Complexity and the CCSS

TEXT COMPLEXITY DEFINED

What is meant by text complexity is a measurement of how challenging a particular text is to read. There are a myriad of different ways of explaining what makes text challenging to read, from the sophistication of the vocabulary employed to the length of its sentences to even measurements of how the text as a whole coheres. Research shows that no matter what combination of factors is considered when defining text complexity, the ability to read complex text is the single greatest predictor of success in college. This finding is true regardless of gender, race, or socio-economic status. The implication is that teaching that focused solely on critical thinking would be insufficient: it turns out that being able to proficiently read complex text is the critical factor in actually understanding complex text (**APPENDIX A, 2-4**).

Yet that same research also shows that while the complexity of text in college and career has remained steady, the complexity of texts students are given in elementary and secondary school has diminished over time. The result is a significant gap between the reading ability of students and what will be expected of them upon graduation—a gap so large that less than 50% of high school graduates are able to read college and career ready complex text independently.

TEXT COMPLEXITY AND THE CCSS

Reading complex text lies at the heart of the new standards, with the text complexity demand growing steadily over the course of a student's K-12 education. A key requirement of the **ANCHOR READING STANDARD 10** in the Common Core State Standards is that all students must be exposed to texts of steadily increasing complexity. The system for determining text complexity involves several factors, but the increased expectations regarding the ability of students to read complex text is illustrated by a comparison of past and present Lexile Ranges:

Grade Band	Old Lexile Ranges	CCR Lexile Ranges
2-3	450–725	420–820
4-5	645–845	740–1010
6-8	860–1010	925–1185
9-10	960–1115	1050–1335
11–CCR	1070–1220	1185–1385

KEY ELEMENTS OF TEXT COMPLEXITY: QUANTITATIVE, QUALITATIVE, AND READER AND TASK FACTORS

QUANTITATIVE FACTORS look at those features of a text that impact "readability" as measured by computer programs like Lexile. These programs weigh word length, frequency and difficulty as well as sentence and text length and text cohesion as proxies to create a measurement of text complexity. (The Lexile Framework can also use particular reading assessments to place readers on the same scale as well).

For example, the Lexile score for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is 860, which initially locates the text almost at the midpoint of the 4-5 Grade Band Range. It should be noted that many of the computer programs that measure complexity assign low scores to complex narrative fiction—scores generated by the simplicity of the sentence structure and vocabulary of these texts despite their complex themes and text structures.

Qualitative Factors involve an attentive teacher making informed decisions regarding the difficulty of a text. Consideration of qualitative factors is crucial because quantitative measures cannot fully capture all the nuances regarding the difficulty of a text. Because quantitative factors rely on the aforementioned elements when measuring difficulty, a complex text that does not conform to those expectations—like poetry—cannot be measured using computers. Instead, the qualitative factors listed below should be additionally weighed and considered. These factors lie on a continuum of difficulty and therefore cannot be reduced to a score, but rather inform educators whether the initial grade band placement via the quantitative factors is correct or should be revised.

- **Meaning/Purpose**: single versus multiple levels of meaning/purpose

- **Knowledge Demands**: few versus many assumptions about a reader's life experiences

- **Visual Supports**: heavy or light use of graphics depending on the type of text

- **Language Features**: literal/conversational versus figurative/domain-specific vocabulary

- **Text Structure**: conventional/chronological versus unconventional structures

Finally, **Reader and Task Factors** consider additional "outside" information that might impact the difficulty of reading the text, and inform educators regarding the placement of the text within the identified grade band. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject.

- **Complexity of Content:** is the theme particularly challenging?

- **Cognitive Capacities:** will the reader be able to focus on the text?

- **Reading Skills:** does the reader struggle with comprehension?

- **Motivation & Engagement:** will the reader be motivated and engaged?

- **Prior Knowledge:** does the reader need additional background?

- **Tasks and Assessment:** are the tasks and assessments planned particularly challenging?

These factors impact the development of students' reading ability in various ways, and should be considered when selecting and placing texts within a grade band. For instance, students need both to be challenged when reading but also benefit from exposure to texts where their skill level allows them to read fluently. They need exposure to new ideas and perspectives but also relish the opportunity to read about what they already know and enjoy. And students of all ability levels will need assistance and scaffolding on occasion when reading complex texts above their current ability level.

Text Complexity and Below Grade Level Readers

It is undeniable that the challenge of reading complex text is even more taxing for those students who arrive at school unable to read on grade level. Students whose families have less education are exposed less to complex text at home, and hence arrive at school with fewer reading skills than their classmates who have been encouraged to become independent readers. Yet being able to read complex text is critical for success in college and the workplace, and research shows that working with complex text is the only way to gain mature language skills. It is critical that all students develop the skill, concentration, and stamina to read complex texts. The ultimate goal of instruction therefore is to move students in the direction of independent reading at successive levels of text complexity, culminating in college and career ready reading proficiency.