**Close Look at Close Reading: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts, Grades K–5**

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**Chapter 1. Understanding and Evaluating Text Complexity**

In the United States today, teachers and administrators are buzzing about the Common Core State Standards, especially the English language arts requirements for text complexity and close reading. These areas represent two big shifts from present state standards documents across the country, and they require big shifts in teacher practice in terms of the texts used with students, the reading tasks assigned, and the way teachers must think about instruction.

Why the emphasis on complex text? According to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (2011), one of the assessment consortia for the Common Core State Standards,

A significant body of research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness. (p. 7)

To create the instruction that will help each of your students achieve the goals of the Common Core standards and, in doing so, become more proficient readers and writers across the disciplines, you need both a thorough understanding of the standards and a solid grasp of the concepts and practices related to text complexity and close reading. In this chapter, we will use a question-and-answer format to explore the questions about text complexity and close reading that we are most often asked by the teachers with whom we work.

**A High-Level View of Text Complexity**

Take a moment to review the following list of elementary texts and put them in order from least complex (1) to most complex (6):

* —*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*
* —*Volcanoes: Nature's Incredible Fireworks*
* —*Because of Winn-Dixie*
* —*Martin's Big Words*
* —*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*
* —*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

What criteria did you use in your rankings? Did you think about the content and how accessible it might be to readers? Did you consider the kind of vocabulary used in these texts and their general language style? Maybe you considered the length of the text overall, how many syllables were in the longest words, the length of the sentences, and how many concepts might be bound within each sentence. And perhaps you factored in the authors' thematic purposes.

When ranking the complexity of these texts, you were thinking about **quantitative features**—ones that can be counted, like the number of syllables, and also about **qualitative features**—aspects such as the language used, the complexity of the shared ideas, and other attributes of the text, such as its structure, style, and levels of meaning. In your ranking, if you thought about how challenging the text would be for a specific reader or group of readers, you were considering a third dimension of text complexity, referred to as **reader/text factors.** All three dimensions factor in when it's time to select a text that is sufficiently complex for students to read closely.

**Answers to 12 Frequently Asked Questions About Text Complexity**

**1. Reading Anchor Standard 10 of the Common Core standards states that students should read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently. What does this mean?**

Here is what the standard requires. At the 1st grade level, Reading Standard 10 asserts that "*with prompting and support*, students will read and comprehend both complex literature and informational texts" (RL.1.10, RI.1.10). In 2nd grade, students are expected to "read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts proficiently*, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range"* (RL.2.10, RI.2.10). From 3rd grade on, Reading Standard 10 asserts that students will "*read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently* at the high end of the grade-level text complexity band" (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 10).

Reading Standard 10 is a critical standard in the Common Core. Its call for students to engage in the practice of closely reading increasing complex texts represents a seismic shift from past practices in literacy instruction, which, in many classrooms, tended to focus primarily on students reading grade-level texts rather than complex texts and literary texts rather than informational ones.

**2. Why is it so important that every teacher be aware of Reading Anchor Standard 10's call for students to read increasingly complex texts?**

All teachers need to focus on Reading Standard 10 for the following reasons:

1. The standard applies to all students in all the content areas that are covered by the ELA/literacy standards, including history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.
2. It requires that teachers in grades 2–12 assign students texts that may be more challenging than those teachers have assigned in the past. (The requirement for increased complexity applies to grades K–1 only in terms of the texts teachers read aloud.)
3. It means that teachers in all content areas in grades 2–12 will need to ensure that their students get a regular diet of complex texts.

In other words, students at all grade levels will benefit from instruction that helps build their understanding of the process of close reading and further develops the skills and stamina they will need to closely read complex texts. All teachers will need to create lessons that scaffold student understanding in ways that will allow them to read appropriately complex texts independently by the end of the school year.

**3. Why do the Common Core standards call for students to read texts that are more complex?**

The emphasis on increased text complexity in the Common Core can be traced to an intriguing study published by ACT (2006), the company that creates the widely used college readiness exam of the same name. This study examined 568,000 8th, 10th, and 12th graders' results on the three reading tests of the ACT and compared these scores against a benchmark level of "college readiness"—which predicted college acceptance, retention, and attainment of a 3.0 grade point average. Only 51 percent of the 12th grade students in the study met this benchmark.

The ACT researchers then took a closer look at student responses to determine what factors distinguished students who met the benchmark from those who did not. They divided the texts found on the tests into three levels (*uncomplicated, more challenging*, and *complex*) and analyzed student responses to each text type. Based on these data, ACT concluded that "students who can read complex texts are more likely to be ready for college. Those who cannot read complex texts are less likely to be ready for college" (2006, p. 11).

The texts students presently read at all grade levels are far less complex than they should be if students are to attain the literacy levels they will need for college and career success. For example, Williamson (2006) reports that the complexity level of "college and career texts," meaning the texts students typically read as part of college coursework or that are required for career success, is around a Lexile measure of 1350L (see p. 22 for more about Lexile measures). This is 130 points *higher* than the complexity level of materials presently used with high school students in grades 11 and 12, which are typically around a Lexile measure of 1220L. While student reading materials in grades 4 and up have become easier over time (Adams, 2010–2011), college texts have become more difficult (Stenner, Koons, & Swartz, 2010).

In order to close this "text complexity gap," the Common Core standards recommend students begin reading texts with higher Lexile measures in grades 2 and 3. It falls to teachers to provide the direct skill instruction and scaffolding that students need to do so. A wise teacher knows when and where to add scaffolds that support learning within each discipline and enable students to make sense of unfamiliar language, concepts, and stylistic devices used by the author; gain an understanding of text structure, purpose, and intent; and build surface or nonexistent topical knowledge. Put concisely, good instruction supports students' reading of increasingly complex texts, first by showing them how to tackle these texts and then by giving them many close reading opportunities.

**4. What exactly does the term "text complexity" mean?**

Text complexity refers to the *level of challenge* a text provides based on a trio of considerations: its quantitative features, its qualitative features, and reader/text factors. These considerations are detailed in the answers to Questions 5–9.

The concept of text complexity is based on the premise that students become stronger readers by reading increasingly challenging texts. Here is a simple analogy. Barb, one of the authors of this book, is a runner. She can continue to run at the same pace as she always has, which is very comfortable for her, but if she wants to run faster, she has to work at improving her speed—move out of her comfort zone and stretch herself. It will be a gradual process, requiring deliberate effort and lots of practice over a period of months (or, in her case, maybe years). In the same way, the writers of the Common Core want students to reach reading levels necessary for college and workplace success by high school graduation. To build the literacy skills identified in the Common Core State Standards, students in grades 2–12 need plenty of practice reading increasingly complex texts as they move from one grade level to the next. The writers of the Common Core reject the idea of putting students in "comfort level" instructional materials and keeping them there; instead, they challenge teachers to "ramp up" text difficulty as students move through each grade level in order to create increased challenge over time and support the continual development of literacy skill.

**5. What are the quantitative features of text complexity?**

Quantitative features of text complexity are the features that can be counted or quantified—sentence length, number of syllables, word length, word frequency and other features that can be calculated on the computer. Typically, these calculations generate a grade-level designation, such as "3.5" (3rd grade, fifth month).

**6. What are Lexile text measures, and how do they correspond to grade-level designations?**

Lexile text measures are a numeric representation of a text's readability. They have become the readability formula of choice for measuring the quantitative features of the texts recommended for use with the Common Core standards. Like other readability formulas (e.g., Accelerated Reader™ ATOS levels, the Fry Readability Formula), Lexile text measures are based on factors such as word frequency and sentence length. However, rather than rate text in terms of grade-levels, Lexiles generate a number that can range from 0L (the "L" is for "Lexile") to above 2000L. MetaMetrics, the company that created Lexile measures, also provides additional codes to clarify a text's appropriate audience. For example, texts that measure at 0L or below on the Lexile score receive a "BR" code for "beginning reader." Texts designated as "AD" ("adult directed") are those that are more appropriately read *to* a child than *by* a child. Texts coded "NC" ("nonconforming") may have higher Lexile measures than is typical for the publisher's intended audience, and those coded "HL" ("high low") have lower Lexile measures than expected for the intended audience. For information on additional Lexile codes, please see [www.lexile.com](http://www.lexile.com).

**Figure 1.1. The Lexile Levels of Typical Elementary Readers and Common Core "Stretch-Level" Texts**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Grade** | **Mid-Year Lexile Levels of Middle 50% of Students** | **Text Demand of Common Core Stretch-Level Texts** |
| K | – | – |
| 1 | Up to 300 L | 190L to 530L |
| 2 | 140L–500L | 420L to 650L |
| 3 | 330L–700L | 520L to 820L |
| 4 | 445L–810L | 740L to 940L |
| 5 | 656L–910L | 830L to 1010L |
| *Source:* MetaMetrics (2014a, 2014b). | | |

There is no set correspondence between Lexile levels and grade levels; it's expected that students within a particular grade will be able to comfortably read texts that fall within a range of Lexile levels. In Figure 1.1, you can see data on the Lexile levels of the middle 50 percent of elementary readers midway through grades 1–5 juxtaposed with Lexile ranges of the texts recommended by the Common Core as challenging "stretch texts" necessary to keep students on track for mastering Reading Anchor Standard 10.

**7. What are the limitations of evaluating a text by quantitative features alone?**

As you are probably aware, Lexile measures can sometimes be suspect. For example, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* has a Lexile measure of 680L, placing it within the reading range of 4th or 5th graders. However, this book also contains weighty themes, such as the ill treatment of migrant workers, the inhumanity of groups toward one another, and the need for individual adaptability in order to survive. Although *The Grapes of Wrath* may not have complex language, it certainly has complex themes that are beyond the grasp of most 10-year-old children.

This discrepancy illustrates an important limitation of Lexile measures: They do not assess the *content* of a text. Quantitative measures of text complexity are the *least* reliable of the triad for just this reason. "Readability" measured in this way accounts for only about 50 percent of text difficulty (Shanahan, 2009). In order to get a more realistic perspective about text complexity we also need to consider a text's qualitative features and the knowledge, language, and sophistication of the students who will be reading that text.

**8. What are the qualitative features of text complexity?**

The qualitative features of a text are the aspects and nuances of it that can't be measured by a simple formula. They require careful content analysis by thoughtful teachers who scrutinize texts before sharing them with their students.

To further illustrate why it's impossible to determine the complexity of a text by simply counting its readability factors, imagine a 5th grader who is studying stars in science class coming across this sentence: *The sun is a ball of gas*. Although the sentence contains only seven words, all of which are one syllable, it is more complex than it seems. A child who has good decoding skills may read this sentence with fluency and expression and think she knows what it means because she also knows the definition of the nouns *ball* and *gas*. However, if pushed for an explanation, the child may have difficulty explaining the sentence. To do so requires the understanding that gases are able to generate heat and light through the process of nuclear fusion and that the spherical shape of the sun (and of other celestial objects) is the result of gravity pulling inward. To determine the true complexity of a sentence, we must also identify the related conceptual knowledge, the language demands, and the motivation a reader needs for comprehension.

When authors write, they make assumptions about the knowledge of the reader. When authors add features like examples, pictures, and descriptions, they are helping to support the reader; without these supports, the reader must have more knowledge, related language, and motivation in order to stay with the text and comprehend its meaning. The conceptually required background knowledge, motivation, and proficiency with language needed on the part of the reader to comprehend a specific text are sometimes referred to as knowledge demands.

Other qualitative dimensions of a text for a teacher to evaluate are text structure, language features, meaning, and author's purpose. To carefully analyze a text, teachers must consider the challenges of a text in view of each of these areas. Such a detailed analysis helps to flag dimensions of a text that may be challenging to students and will need to become specific teaching points during close reading lessons (see Chapter 3 for examples).

**9. How do I go about analyzing the qualitative features of a text?**

To determine the complexity of a text based on its qualitative features, you need to consider the students who will be reading the text and use criteria keyed to each dimension (text structure, language features, meaning, author's purpose, and knowledge demands) to analyze those areas that may interfere with students' comprehension. Both narrative text (literature) and informational text can be evaluated by looking at these dimensions (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3), but the differences in these text types' content and purposes mean you'll need to use different criteria, which we'll look at now.

**Text Structure**

How a text is structured or organized is the first key consideration for qualitative evaluation. Picture books with straightforward linear narrative plotlines, such as Pam Conrad's *The Tub People*, are generally easier for elementary readers to comprehend than books like Vera B. Williams's *A Chair for My Mother* that use flashbacks or flash forwards. Well-organized informational texts often have one or more expository structures, which include description, sequence, compare/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution. Titles like Clyde Robert Bulla's *A Tree Is a Plant*, with a single sequential structure, are less complex than a book like Isabella Hatkoff, Craig Hatkoff, and Paula Kahumbu's *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship*, which employs cause/effect at the beginning of the book, sequence in the middle, and compare/contrast near the end of the book (when Owen's behavior is compared to that of a hippo).

**Figure 1.2. Qualitative Scoring Rubric for Narrative Text/Literature**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dimension & Consideration** | **Questions** | **Scoring = 1 Easy or Comfortable Text** | **Scoring = 2 Moderate or Grade-Level Text** | **Scoring = 3 Challenging or Stretch Text** |
| Text Structure: Organization | • Does the text follow a typical chronological plot pattern, or is it more elaborate and unconventional, incorporating multiple storylines, shifts in time (flashbacks, flash forwards), shifts in point of view, and other devices? | □ The text follows a simple conventional chronological plot pattern, with few or no shifts in point of view or time; plot is highly predictable. | □ The text organization is somewhat unconventional; may have two or more storylines and some shifts in time and point of view; plot is sometimes hard to predict. | □ The text organization is intricate and unconventional, with multiple subplots and shifts in time and point of view; plot is unpredictable. |
| *Notes on Organization* |  |  |  |  |
| Text Structure: Visual Support and Layout | • Is text placement consistent, or is there variability in placement, with multiple columns?  • Are visuals compatible/consistent with the storyline? | □ Text placement is consistent throughout the text and uses a large readable font.  □ Illustrations directly support text content. | □ Text placement may include columns, text interrupted by illustrations, or other variations; uses a smaller font size.  □ Illustrations support the text directly but may include images that require synthesis of text. | □ Text placement includes columns and many inconsistencies as well as very small font size.  □ Few illustrations that support the text directly; most require deep analysis and synthesis. |
| *Notes on Visual Support and Layout* |  |  |  |  |
| Text Structure: Relationships Among Ideas | • Are relationships among ideas or characters obvious or fairly subtle? | □ Relationships among ideas or characters are clear and obvious. | □ Relationships among ideas or characters are subtle and complex. | □ Relationships among ideas or characters are complex, are embedded, and must be inferred. |
| *Notes on Relationships Among Ideas* |  |  |  |  |
| Language Features: Author's Style | • Is it easy or difficult for the reader to identify the author's style?  • Is the language used simple or more intricate, with complex sentence structures and subtle figurative language? | □ The style of the text is explicit and easy to comprehend.  □ The language of the text is conversational and straightforward, with simple sentence structures. | □ The style of the text combines explicit with complex meanings.  □ The language of the text is complex, may be somewhat unfamiliar, and includes some subtle figurative or literary language and complex sentence structures. | □ The style of the text is abstract, and the language is ambiguous and generally unfamiliar.  □ The text includes a great deal of sophisticated figurative language (e.g., metaphors, similes, literary allusions) and complex sentences combining multiple concepts. |
| *Notes on Author's Style* |  |  |  |  |
| Language Features: Vocabulary | • Are the author's word choices simple or complex?  • How demanding is the vocabulary load?  • Can word meanings be determined through context clues or not? | □ Vocabulary is accessible, familiar, and can be determined through context clues. | □ Vocabulary combines familiar terms with academic vocabulary appropriate to the grade level. | □ Vocabulary includes extensive academic vocabulary, including many unfamiliar terms. |
| *Notes on Vocabulary* |  |  |  |  |
| Meaning | • Is the text meaning simple or rich with complex ideas that must be inferred? | □ The text contains simple ideas with one level of meaning conveyed through obvious literary devices. | □ The text contains some complex ideas with more than one level of meaning conveyed through subtle literary devices. | □ The text includes substantial ideas with several levels of inferred meaning conveyed through highly sophisticated literary devices. |
| *Notes on Meaning* |  |  |  |  |
| Author's Purpose | • Is the author's purpose evident or implied/ambiguous? | □ The purpose of the text is simple, clear, concrete, and easy to identify. | □ The purpose of the text is somewhat subtle, requires interpretation, or is abstract. | □ The purpose of the text is abstract, implicit, or ambiguous, and is revealed through the totality of the text. |
| *Notes on Author's Purpose* |  |  |  |  |
| Knowledge Demands | • How much and what kinds of background knowledge are needed to comprehend this text?  • Do my students have the background knowledge to comprehend this text? | □ Experiences portrayed are common life experiences; everyday cultural or literary knowledge is required. | □ Experiences portrayed include both common and less common experiences; some cultural, historical, or literary background knowledge is required. | □ Experiences portrayed are unfamiliar to most readers. The text requires extensive depth of cultural, historical, or literary background knowledge. |
| *Notes on Knowledge Demands* |  |  |  |  |

**Figure 1.3. Qualitative Scoring Rubric for Informational Text**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dimension & Consideration** | **Questions** | **Scoring = 1 Easy or Comfortable Text** | **Scoring = 2 Moderate or Grade-Level Text** | **Scoring = 3 Challenging or Stretch Text** |
| Text Structure: Organization | • Is the pattern of the text clearly identifiable as descriptive, sequential, problem/solution, compare/contrast, or cause/effect?  • Are signal words used to alert readers to these structures?  • Are multiple structures used in combination? | □ The text adheres primarily to a single expository text structure and focuses on facts. | □ The text employs multiple expository text structures, includes facts and/or a thesis, and demonstrates characteristics common to a particular discipline. | □ The text organization is intricate, may combine multiple structures or genres, is highly abstract, includes multiple theses, and demonstrates sophisticated organization appropriate to a particular discipline. |
| *Notes on Organization* |  |  |  |  |
| Text Structure: Visual Support and Layout | • Is the text placement consistent, or is there variability in placement with multiple columns?  • Are visuals essential to understanding the text without explanation?  • Are visuals accompanying the text simple or complex? Do they require literal understanding or synthesis and analysis? | □ The text placement is consistent throughout the text and uses a large readable font.  □ Simple charts, graphs, photos, tables, and diagrams directly support the text and are easy to understand. | □ The text placement may include columns, text interrupted by illustrations or other variations, and a smaller font size.  □ Complex charts, graphs, photos, tables and diagrams support the text but require interpretation. | □ The text placement includes columns and many inconsistencies, as well as very small font size.  □ Intricate charts, graphs, photos, tables, and diagrams are not supported by the text and require inference and synthesis of information. |
| *Notes on Visual Support and Layout* |  |  |  |  |
| Text Structure: Relationships Among Ideas | • Are relationships among ideas simple or challenging? | □ Relationships among concepts, processes, or events are clear and explicitly stated. | □ Relationships among some concepts, processes, or events may be implicit and subtle. | □ Relationships among concepts, processes, and events are intricate, deep, and subtle. |
| *Notes on Relationships Among Ideas* |  |  |  |  |
| Language Features: Author's Style | • What point of view does the author take toward the material?  • Is the author's style conversational or academic and formal? | □ The style is simple and conversational, and it may incorporate narrative elements, with simple sentences containing a few concepts. | □ Style is objective, contains passive constructions with highly factual content, and features some nominalization and some compound or complex sentences. | □ Style is specialized to a discipline, contains dense concepts and high nominalization, and features compound and complex sentences. |
| *Notes on Author's Style* |  |  |  |  |
| Language Features: Vocabulary | • How extensive is the author's use of technical vocabulary?  • Can students determine word meanings through context clues? | □ Some vocabulary is subject-specific, but the text includes many terms familiar to students that are supported by context clues. | □ The vocabulary is subject-specific, includes many unfamiliar terms, and provides limited support through context clues. | □ The vocabulary is highly academic, subject-specific, demanding, nuanced, and very context dependent. |
| *Notes on Vocabulary* |  |  |  |  |
| Meaning | • Is the amount and complexity of information conveyed through data sophisticated or not? | □ The information is clear, and concepts are concretely explained. | □ The information includes complex, abstract ideas and extensive details. | □ The information is abstract, intricate, and may be highly theoretical. |
| *Notes on Meaning* |  |  |  |  |
| Author's Purpose | • Is the author's purpose evident or implied/ambiguous? | □ The purpose of the text is simple, clear, concrete, and easy to identify. | □ The purpose of the text is somewhat subtle or abstract and requires interpretation. | □ The purpose of the text is abstract, implicit, or ambiguous, and is revealed through the totality of the text. |
| *Notes on Author's Purpose* |  |  |  |  |
| Knowledge Demands | • How much and what kinds of background knowledge are required to comprehend this text? | □ The content addresses common information familiar to students. | □ The content addresses somewhat technical information that requires some background knowledge to understand fully. | □ The content is highly technical and contains specific information that requires deep background knowledge to understand fully. |
| *Notes on Knowledge Demands* |  |  |  |  |

Visual support and layout are another aspect of text structure that factors into text complexity. Illustrations and visual features such as maps, graphs, charts, and diagrams can support the reader's understanding, but sophisticated visual components may also increase the text's complexity. Layout features can also affect complexity, as can the text's font and the size of the type. Straightforward text layouts are generally the easiest for students to navigate, whereas layouts where multiple columns are interrupted by visuals can be very confusing.

When analyzing a text's structure and organization, also look at the relationships among ideas. These relationships can be simple or complex, but greater complexity means greater reading challenges. In a narrative text, you might consider the relationships among characters or among plots and subplots. In an informational text, you might look instead at the complexity of relationships among main ideas, facts and details, and the concepts discussed. For example, in the Common Core 5th grade informational text exemplar[\*](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/114008/chapters/Understanding-and-Evaluating-Text-Complexity.aspx" \l "fn*)  *Hurricanes: Earth's Mightiest Storms*, author Patricia Lauber identifies the effects of Hurricane Andrew on Everglades National Park, explains the park's recovery from previous hurricanes, and asserts that changes in the surrounding region may result in a less successful recovery from Hurricane Andrew. Throughout this section of the text, the author compares and contrasts conditions in the park, past and present, and describes the potential effect of more recent changes in water flow, plant life, animal life, and human encroachment on the park environment. The reader must recognize the complex relationships among these ideas in order to accurately comprehend the author's message about how this hurricane has affected the region.

**Language Features**

Language features, such as writing style and vocabulary, are the second important dimension of qualitative text complexity to consider. In a narrative text, the author's use of descriptive language and metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, and other devices can make it difficult for students to understand the text's meaning. With informational text, the more conversational the author's style, the easier the text is for students to comprehend. This conversational style is one of the many strengths of Joy Hakim's *A History of US* series and a characteristic that distinguishes it from most textbooks. Here is how the author introduces a discussion of schools in the 19th century: "Remember, when you read history you need to put yourself in a time capsule and zoom back and try to think as people did then. If you do, you will find that America's citizens thought the United States was the most exciting, progressive place in the whole world" (Hakim, 2007, p. 120). One caution is in order here: While conversational informational texts like this are notable for their accessibility, students also need experiences with the more formal style of textbooks.

Consider the role of vocabulary in these two sentences:

The man walked down the street, catching the eye of every girl he passed. The rakish young man sauntered down the boulevard, catching the eye of every young belle he encountered.

Clearly, the second sentence creates a different mood than the first sentence, but it also poses the challenge of more unfamiliar, somewhat archaic vocabulary. It is precisely these interesting word choices that make the text more complex, yet, at the same time, they create the rich mental pictures we experience when we read. Vocabulary is an important determiner of text complexity both in narrative and informational texts, and unfamiliar vocabulary poses even more challenge when context clues are lacking.

Vocabulary often poses particular challenges for students who are learning English as an additional language and students with identified reading or learning disabilities. Like every other child in your classroom, they will need their reading experience scaffolded in ways that support their learning.

**Meaning**

The meaning of a text—the sophistication of its ideas—is a third dimension of qualitative text complexity to factor into your evaluation. Is the book simple and one-dimensional, or are multiple layers of meaning present? For example, on one level, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a book about talking animals, but the author's allegorical message about a society gone wrong goes much deeper than that. It is important to have identified various levels of meaning before sharing a text with students so that your text-dependent questions can prompt students to look more deeply at the text meaning with each rereading.

**Author's Purpose**

The author's purpose is the fourth qualitative dimension to consider. The book *Should There Be Zoos? A Persuasive Text*, by Tony Stead, provides an excellent introduction to persuasive writing that includes arguments written by elementary school children. The author explains in the introduction that the purpose of the text is to present opinions supported by facts on two sides of the question "Should animals be kept in zoos?" This author's purpose is clearly stated, but in many cases, it's up to the reader to infer what the author sets out to do. In *Everglades*, author Jean Craighead George never directly states her purpose but uses a narrative format to persuade the reader of the need to preserve the fragile ecosystem of this region. This inferred purpose creates a greater challenge for readers and, in turn, makes for greater text complexity. (Note: *Everglades* would make a great comparison text for the discussion of the Everglades and hurricanes mentioned on page 31.)

**Knowledge Demands**

The fifth and final consideration for qualitative evaluation is the required background knowledge needed to navigate a text, which we mentioned earlier in the example about the sun as a ball of gas. Some books require students to know a lot about science, history, culture, or particular regions, while others are less background dependent. For example, students who know something about life during the Great Depression will certainly appreciate Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* more than students who lack that knowledge, as this book includes many references to details of the time period, including Depression-era jazz, Buddy's experiences in Hooverville, and gangsters like Pretty Boy Floyd. Conversely, students don't need to know much about the Southern setting of Kate DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie* to comprehend the story she is telling.

**10. How do I evaluate the qualitative dimensions of text?**

The rubrics presented in Figures 1.2 and 1.3 provide questions you can ask yourself about each of the qualitative dimensions we've covered. The criteria for each dimension for narrative texts/literature (Figure 1.2) and informational texts (Figure 1.3) will help you determine whether to rate reading material as easy, moderately difficult, or challenging for students at a particular grade level. Remember, this evaluative process is important because it allows you to identify potential teaching points in relationship to each text and your particular group of students.

In Figure 1.4, we share how this rubric was used by 2nd grade teacher Alison Zamarelli to identify teaching points when introducing her students to *The Fire Cat* by Esther Averill. With her students in mind, she was able to identify areas of the story that might cause them difficulty and then use this information to plan instruction that would effectively support their learning. The "checked" areas identify the possible points of struggle for her students, and you can see Ms. Zamarelli's notes about how she plans to address these areas in her instruction.

As we can see from her annotated rubric, Ms. Zamarelli's 2nd grade students may not need much support in building background knowledge about firefighters and firehouses. Additionally, she's confident that the text structure, style and language, and vocabulary will be comfortable for them. The teacher will focus her close reading lessons around supporting students' understanding of characters' relationships, exploring the richness of the levels of meanings, examining visual supports, and discerning the author's purpose. The text-dependent questions she plans to ask in these four areas redirect students back to the text to uncover a deeper understanding of the story.

The next example, in Figure 1.5, illustrates how 4th grade teacher David Flynn assessed the "Living Fences" section of Erinn Banting's informational text *England: The Land* with his students in mind.

Mr. Flynn's annotated rubric shows that he did not believe his students would struggle with the relationships, richness, structure, or visual supports in this text, but he did feel they would need support with the style and language, vocabulary, and author's purpose. This text is rich with subject-specific words (*hedgerows, spiny plants*) and multiple-meaning phrases (*gained control*) that he would need to help them uncover through text-dependent questions and multiple readings of the two-paragraph text. Transition words, such as *in contrast, however*, and *unlike*, are missing from this text, so students might need help understanding the author's purpose, which was to compare living fences from the past to the present day. Mr. Flynn might make the comparison more explicit by making it the focus of the lesson.

**Figure 1.4. Qualitative Scoring Rubric for Narrative Text/Literature Applied to Averill's *The Fire Cat***

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Dimension & Consideration** | **Questions** | **Scoring = 1 Easy or Comfortable Text** | **Scoring = 2 Moderate or Grade-Level Text** | **Scoring = 3 Challenging or Stretch Text** |
| Text Structure: Organization | • Does the text follow a typical chronological plot pattern, or is it more elaborate and unconventional, incorporating multiple storylines, shifts in time (flashbacks, flash forwards), shifts in point of view, and other devices? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe text follows a simple conventional chronological plot pattern, with few or no shifts in point of view or time; plot is highly predictable. | □ The text organization is somewhat unconventional; may have two or more storylines and some shifts in time and point of view; plot is sometimes hard to predict. | □ The text organization is intricate and unconventional, with multiple subplots and shifts in time and point of view; plot is unpredictable. |
| *Notes on Organization* |  | ***The structure is conventional and predictable and poses no challenges for students.*** |  |  |
| Text Structure: Visual Support and Layout | • Is text placement consistent, or is there variability in placement, with multiple columns?  • Are visuals compatible/consistent with the storyline? | □ Text placement is consistent throughout the text and uses a large readable font.  □ Illustrations directly support text content. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifText placement may include columns, text interrupted by illustrations, or other variations; uses a smaller font size.  □ Illustrations support the text directly but may include images that require synthesis of text. | □ Text placement includes columns and many inconsistencies as well as very small font size.  □ Few illustrations that support the text directly; most require deep analysis and synthesis. |
| *Notes on Visual Support and Layout* |  |  | ***Words in all capital letters (BUMP, IF) might be a challenge.*** |  |
| Text Structure: Relationships Among Ideas | • Are relationships among ideas or characters obvious or fairly subtle? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifRelationships among ideas or characters are clear and obvious. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifRelationships among ideas or characters are subtle and complex. | □ Relationships among ideas or characters are complex, are embedded, and must be inferred. |
| *Notes on Relationships Among Ideas* |  | **Students are familiar with the experiences of firefighters (sliding down a pole, riding in a truck, putting out fires).** | **They may not understand why the fire chief continues to "not say anything," implying how he has doubts about the cat's abilities and loyalties.** |  |
| Language Features: Author's Style | • Is it easy or difficult for the reader to identify the author's style?  • Is the language used simple or more intricate, with complex sentence structures and subtle figurative language? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe style of the text is explicit and easy to comprehend.  http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe language of the text is conversational and straightforward, with simple sentence structures. | □ The style of the text combines explicit with complex meanings.  □ The language of the text is complex, may be somewhat unfamiliar, and includes some subtle figurative or literary language and complex sentence structures. | □ The style of the text is abstract, and the language is ambiguous and generally unfamiliar.  □ The text includes a great deal of sophisticated figurative language (e.g., metaphors, similes, literary allusions) and complex sentences combining multiple concepts. |
| *Notes on Author's Style* |  | ***Style of text is easy to comprehend, with simple sentence structure.*** |  |  |
| Language Features: Vocabulary | • Are the author's word choices simple or complex?  • How demanding is the vocabulary load?  • Can word meanings be determined through context clues or not? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifVocabulary is accessible, familiar, and can be determined through context clues. | □ Vocabulary combines familiar terms with academic vocabulary appropriate to the grade level. | □ Vocabulary includes extensive academic vocabulary, including many unfamiliar terms. |
| *Notes on Vocabulary* |  | ***Vocabulary is familiar, and words can be determined through context clues (The pole was the fastest way to get to their trucks.)*** |  |  |
| Language Features: Meaning | • Is the text meaning simple or rich with complex ideas that must be inferred? | □ The text contains simple ideas with one level of meaning conveyed through obvious literary devices. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe text contains some complex ideas with more than one level of meaning conveyed through subtle literary devices. | □ The text includes substantial ideas with several levels of inferred meaning conveyed through highly sophisticated literary devices. |
| *Notes on Meaning* |  |  | ***Students may focus on this as a story about a cat and not understand that it is about second chances and friendships.*** |  |
| Author's Purpose | • Is the author's purpose evident or implied/ambiguous? | □ The purpose of the text is simple, clear, concrete, and easy to identify. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe purpose of the text is somewhat subtle, requires interpretation, or is abstract. | □ The purpose of the text is abstract, implicit, or ambiguous, and is revealed through the totality of the text. |
| *Notes on Author's Purpose* |  |  | ***Purpose is to tell a story about relationships and dynamic characters—not simply tell about a cat at a firehouse.*** |  |
| Knowledge Demands | • How much and what kinds of background knowledge are needed to comprehend this text?  • Do my students have the background knowledge to comprehend this text? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifExperiences portrayed are common life experiences; everyday cultural or literary knowledge is required. | □ Experiences portrayed include both common and less common experiences; some cultural, historical, or literary background knowledge is required. | □ Experiences portrayed are unfamiliar to most readers. The text requires extensive depth of cultural, historical, or literary background knowledge. |
| *Notes on Knowledge Demands* |  | ***My students have the background knowledge and will understand the common experiences in this text‥*** |  |  |

**Figure 1.5. Qualitative Scoring Rubric for Informational Text Applied to Banting's "Living Fences"**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Consideration & Dimension** | **Questions** | **Scoring = 1 Easy or Comfortable Text** | **Scoring = 2 Moderate or Grade-Level Text** | **Scoring = 3 Challenging or Stretch Text** |
| Text Structure: Organization | • Is the pattern of the text clearly identifiable as descriptive, sequential, problem/solution, compare/contrast, or cause/effect?  • Are signal words used to alert readers to these structures?  • Are multiple structures used in combination? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe text adheres primarily to a single expository text structure and focuses on facts. | □ The text employs multiple expository text structures, includes facts and/or a thesis, and demonstrates characteristics common to a particular discipline. | □ The text organization is intricate, may combine multiple structures or genres, is highly abstract, includes multiple theses, and demonstrates sophisticated organization appropriate to a particular discipline. |
| *Notes on Organization* |  | Single expository text structure with facts and information. |  |  |
| Text Structure: Visual Support and Layout | • Is the text placement consistent, or is there variability in placement with multiple columns?  • Are visuals essential to understanding the text without explanation?  • Are visuals accompanying the text simple or complex? Do they require literal understanding or synthesis and analysis? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe text placement is consistent throughout the text and uses a large readable font.  http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifSimple charts, graphs, photos, tables, and diagrams directly support the text and are easy to understand. | □ The text placement may include columns, text interrupted by illustrations or other variations, and a smaller font size.  □ Complex charts, graphs, photos, tables and diagrams support the text but require interpretation. | □ The text placement includes columns and many inconsistencies, as well as very small font size.  □ Intricate charts, graphs, photos, tables, and diagrams are not supported by the text and require inference and synthesis of information. |
| *Notes on Visual Support and Layout* |  | Comfortable visual supports and layout for students. Easy to understand. |  |  |
| Language Features: Relationships Among Ideas | • Are relationships among ideas simple or challenging? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifRelationships among concepts, processes, or events are clear and explicitly stated. | □ Relationships among some concepts, processes, or events may be implicit and subtle. | □ Relationships among concepts, processes, and events are intricate, deep, and subtle. |
| *Notes on Relationships Among Ideas* |  | Concepts of living fences are clear and explicit. |  |  |
| Language Features: Author's Style | • What point of view does the author take toward the material?  • Is the author's style conversational or academic and formal? | □ The style is simple and conversational, and it may incorporate narrative elements, with simple sentences containing a few concepts. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifStyle is objective, featuring passive constructions, highly factual content, some nominalization, and compound or complex sentences. | □ Style is specialized to a discipline, contains dense concepts and high nominalization, and features compound and complex sentences. |
| *Notes on Author's Style* |  |  | Compound sentences are used, with several uses of commas, separating and connecting ideas. |  |
| Language Features: Vocabulary | • How extensive is the author's use of technical vocabulary?  • Can students determine word meanings through context clues? | □ Some vocabulary is subject-specific, but the text includes many terms familiar to students that are supported by context clues. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe vocabulary is subject-specific, includes many unfamiliar terms, and provides limited support through context clues. | □ The vocabulary is highly academic, subject-specific, demanding, nuanced, and very context dependent. |
| *Notes on Vocabulary* |  |  | There are some context clues (dead hedgerows), but subject-specific vocabulary is challenging. |  |
| Meaning | • Is the amount and complexity of information conveyed through data sophisticated or not? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe information is clear, and concepts are concretely explained. | □ The information includes complex, abstract ideas and extensive details. | □ The information is abstract, intricate, and may be highly theoretical. |
| *Notes on Meaning* |  | Students won't struggle with the clear meaning of living fences. The use of living fences in 410 AD. and the current fight to help save them is very explicitly explained. |  |  |
| Author's Purpose | • Is the author's purpose evident or implied/ambiguous? | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe purpose of the text is simple, clear, concrete, and easy to identify. | □ The purpose of the text is somewhat subtle or abstract and requires interpretation. | □ The purpose of the text is abstract, implicit, or ambiguous, and is revealed through the totality of the text. |
| *Notes on Author's Purpose* |  | The purpose (to explain living fences and compare them to the present) is easy to identify. |  |  |
| Knowledge Demands | • How much and what kinds of background knowledge are required to comprehend this text? | □ The content addresses common information familiar to students. | http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/images/publications/books/lapp2015_check.gifThe content addresses somewhat technical information that requires some background knowledge to understand fully. | □ The content is highly technical and contains specific information that requires deep background knowledge to understand fully. |
| *Notes on Knowledge Demands* |  |  | Students aren't likely to be familiar with the history of England in 410 AD. |  |

By considering each of the qualitative criteria, teachers become more sensitive to the challenges of a text in terms of each dimension and are therefore better prepared to effectively instruct students as they encounter these challenging texts. No text evaluation is complete, however, without considering the reader and the task, which is the topic of the next question.

**11. What are the reader/task factors of text complexity?**

The third leg of the text complexity triad shifts the emphasis from the text itself to reflections about students and their levels of preparation for tackling both the target text and the assigned learning tasks. Students are at the center of the instructional enterprise, and this is as true with close reading of complex texts as with any other learning experience. According to Wessling, Lillge, and VanKooten (2011), "foregrounding student learning needs, abilities and interests provides a useful lens and necessary lens through which to interpret and implement the [Common Core standards]" (p. 92). In other words, we cannot consider text complexity without careful and deliberate consideration of our students and their strengths and needs along with the demands of the tasks we give them.

Complex texts and the demands of close reading require students to read in ways that may be somewhat unfamiliar to them. Many are accustomed to reading quickly and skimming and scanning texts in ways that may cause them to miss important information. As Bauerline (2011) observes, "complex texts require a slower labor. Readers can't proceed to the next paragraph without getting the previous one, they can't glide over unfamiliar words and phrases, and they can't forget what they read four pages earlier. They must double back, discern ambiguities, follow tricky transitions … and acquire the knack of slow linear reading" (p. 28). Developing these habits of practice requires time, experience, and effective teacher scaffolding.

Every day, as teachers plan lessons, they consider their readers in relationship to the challenges of a text and consider if and how they will scaffold their instruction to create the optimum match between reader, text, and task. There are four general areas of consideration that are essential to student success with close reading of complex texts: (1) reading and cognitive skills, (2) prior knowledge and experience, (3) motivation and engagement, and (4) specific task concerns. A checklist like the one in Figure 1.6 can help you evaluate your students' readiness for a particular text. Let's walk through this process, referring to our earlier example of *The Fire Cat*.

**Figure 1.6. Comprehension Checklist**

|  |
| --- |
| **Reading and Cognitive Skills**   * □ Do my students have the literal and critical comprehension skills to understand this text? If not, how will I scaffold the information? * □ Will my students have the ability to infer the deeper meanings of the text rather than just achieve literal understanding? If not, what experiences will ready them for this? * □ Will this text promote the development of critical thinking skills in my students?   *What are my next instructional steps to support my students having a context for successfully reading the selected text?* |
| **Prior Knowledge and Experience**   * □ Will my students grasp the purpose for reading the text? * □ Do my students have the prior knowledge and academic vocabulary required for navigating this text? * □ Are my students familiar with this particular genre and its characteristics? * □ Do my students have the maturity level required to address the text content?   *What are my next instructional steps to support my students having a context for successfully reading the selected text?* |
| **Motivation and Engagement**   * □ Will my students be motivated to read this text based on its content and writing style? * □ Do my students have the reading stamina to stick with this text with my support?   *What are my next instructional steps to support my students having a context for successfully reading the selected text?* |
| **Task Concerns**   * □ What is the level of difficulty of the task associated with this text? * □ How much experience do my students have with this type of task? * □ Have I created a moderately difficult task if the text is very challenging and/or created a more challenging task for an easier text?   *What are my next instructional steps to support my students having a context for successfully reading the selected text?* |

**Reading and cognitive skills.** Students may have the literal comprehension skills to understand how the cat turns "good" by learning to slide down the fire pole and sit up straight in the fire truck. This is conveyed very clearly in the text and through the illustrations. However, a teacher may need to scaffold some of the deeper-level thinking skills that students may not have fully developed by comparing the fire chief to adults in their lives. Since students will most likely gloss over this character trait or not know how to understand the author's characterization of the fire chief as silent and aloof, this should be a focal point for this lesson.

**Prior knowledge and experience.***The Fire Cat* is a storybook—a genre students are likely to be familiar with— and it has a clear story structure. Most students will also have sufficient prior knowledge about cats, firefighters, and fire stations. However, a teacher should carefully consider the specific group of students and how well they will be able to determine that in addition to telling a story about cats, the author's purpose includes communicating the theme of friendship and loyalty.

**Motivation and engagement.** It is likely that students will have the motivation and engagement to read this text—if only to find out what happens to the cat and how he becomes a member of the firefighting team. When it comes to a close reading of this text, the teacher will probably focus attention on supporting students in other ways.

**Task concerns.** Say the task is for students to retell the story of *The Fire Cat*. It's unlikely that asking students to read through this text on their own will be enough to support all students' success with this task. However, if the teacher provides a graphic organizer that the students can use for recording details and ideas about the story while they read, the task becomes infinitely more supportive.

For an example of how a teacher might examine the reader/task considerations with an informational text, we'll turn our attention back to "Living Fences" from Erinn Banting's *England: The Land*.

**Reading and cognitive skills.** There are not too many words that students would have a hard time decoding in this text. As mentioned earlier, the vocabulary might give some students problems, but most 4th and 5th grade students would not struggle with the cognitive demands of this text.

**Prior knowledge and experience.** The biggest concern might be students' lack of familiarity with why the living fences were first constructed by the Anglo-Saxons in England around 410 AD. Students may well need a bit more context about this time period to get a deeper understanding of the hedges with "spiny plants."

**Motivation and engagement.** Similarly, students without a great deal of prior knowledge about this time period might not approach the text with much curiosity or eagerness. A teacher who understands the connection between prior knowledge and motivation might give students a bit of context to pique their interest and help them engage with the text.

**Task concerns.** Say the task is for students to identify how the composition of the living fences has changed over time. It's unlikely that asking students to independently read this informational text will be enough to support all students' success with this task. However, if the teacher provides a chronological graphic organizer that the students can use to record this sequence of change while reading, the task becomes more approachable.

Without careful consideration of the students themselves, assigning a text like "Living Fences" could result in disengaged readers who check out in class and miss out on understanding living fences' connection to history.

**12. How do I evaluate a text on all three dimensions of complexity?**

For quantitative factors, we recommend using Lexile measures; for qualitative measures, the scoring rubrics in Figures 1.2 and 1.3; and for reader/task considerations, the checklist in Figure 1.6. Remember, all three dimensions of text complexity work in concert with the others. Considering only Lexile measures or only qualitative criteria, for example, will give you an incomplete picture of the text; you must also think about issues related to student needs and the tasks you might assign. The information you gain from analyzing these three dimensions will help you identify and prioritize the features you will address in class so that your students will be able to comprehend their reading.

We hope that this chapter has answered many of your questions about text complexity, text evaluation, text selection, and how to identify related teaching points for close reading. In Chapters 2 and 3, we will discuss, through examples, how to make close reading a part of classroom practice. Understanding text complexity and close reading are major steps on the journey to achieving the major goal of the Common Core State Standards: for every student to become an expert, purposeful reader of increasingly complex texts.

**Endnote**

[\*](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/114008/chapters/Understanding-and-Evaluating-Text-Complexity.aspx" \l "ref*)  For a discussion of the Common Core's text exemplars, please see p. 114.

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