



Literacy Connects

A Content Literacy Newsletter from Regional Professional Development Program-Issue XLVI



Understanding Text Complexity within the CCSS

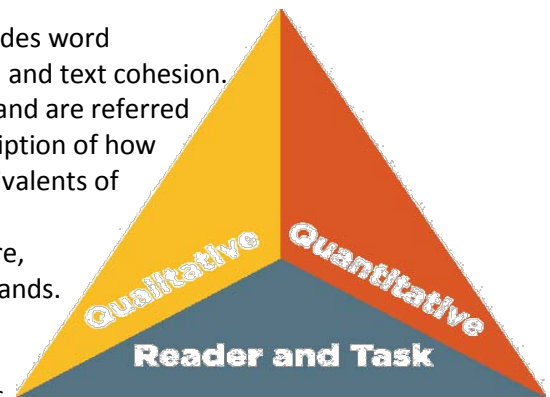
With the adoption of the new Common Core State Standards, teachers are being asked to critically evaluate the level of texts their students are reading. “One of the key requirements of the CCSS for Reading is that all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school.” The goal is to graduate students who can “read and comprehend independently and proficiently the complex texts found in college and careers” (CCSS, [Appendix A](#), page 2).

Research has shown that despite growing reading demands in college and career, K-12 text complexity has decreased over the last 50 years, particularly in the case of informational text. In response to this trend, the CCSS has increased the complexity requirements (see chart below for CCCSS Lexile levels).

Text Complexity Grade Bands	Old Lexile Ranges	Lexile Ranges Aligned to CCCSS
Grades 2-3	450-725	450-790
Grades 4-5	645-845	770-980
Grades 6-8	860-1010	955-1155
Grades 9-10	960-1115	1080-1305
Grades 11-12	1070-1220	1215-1355

Educators have two ways to insure that their students are reading texts at the appropriate levels: (1) They can choose a grade appropriate excerpt from the CCSS [Appendix B: Text Exemplars](#), which provides grade level appropriate examples of literary and informational text and sample performance tasks related to Core Standards, or (2) they can choose their own texts and determine the complexity themselves. With this in mind, the CCSS offer a three-part model to help practitioners evaluate the level of complexity of any text, literary or informational.

- 1. Quantitative measures** refers to text readability and includes word length, frequency and difficulty; sentence and text length; and text cohesion. These features are best measured by computer software and are referred to as Lexile scores. (Go to [Lexile.com](#) for a detailed description of how to use Lexile and for Lexile measures and grade level equivalents of numerous books.)
- 2. Qualitative measures** refers to levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands. Qualitative measures are best determined by the teacher based on considerations such as whether the purpose or theme of the text is explicit or implied; whether the text is organized using an easy to follow structure or one that is more subtle and complex; whether the language used is literal and conversational or ambiguous and unfamiliar; and whether the subject matter requires specialized content knowledge. (Go to [Literacy Connects Resources](#) for rubrics to measure informational and literary text).
- 3. Reader and Task considerations:** This refers to the background knowledge, motivation and interests of the reader, and the complexity generated by assigned tasks. Reader and Task considerations can only be determined by the teacher based on his/her knowledge of the individual



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student. Teachers need to evaluate student readiness based on their cognitive abilities, reading skills, motivation and engagement with the topic, and prior knowledge and experiences. Teachers should also consider the appropriateness of the content matter based on student maturity.

This model to determine text complexity provides teachers with the tools to choose grade appropriate reading for their students based on more than a readability formula. Take for example, To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. When evaluated quantitatively, this high school novel falls in the 4-5 grade band (770-980 Lexile Range); however, when the other two measures are added to the formula, the novel moves to its appropriate level at the 9-10 grade band. This is based on the complexity of ideas presented in the novel, including multiple levels of meaning, a complex narrative structure that includes flashback and inferred meaning, and mature content. Teachers also need to take into account students' understanding of the social and historical events of the time in which To Kill a Mockingbird is set.

Understanding text complexity as required by the CCSS is not difficult. Lexile scores are easy to find online, and using the rubrics and the check-list of questions posted at RPDP.net, Qualitative and Reader and Task Consideration can be accurately measured, as well. The biggest challenge we face is how to prepare our below grade level readers to understand text so far above their reading levels. One way to address this deficit is to design instruction that supports the development of academic language and the background knowledge essential for reading (numbers 2 and 3 of the CCSS complexity model). Before introducing students to the target text, explicitly teach the vocabulary necessary to comprehend the concepts presented. In addition to crucial language areas, text comprehension is also based on world knowledge and student ability to access and relate appropriate background knowledge to the topic. To address this, teachers need to explicitly scaffold instruction in ways that develop students' schema, thus laying the foundation for successful critical literacy experiences.

Using tiered text is one way teachers can scaffold reading for students. Educators can select an easy-to-read text aligned with students' entry-level background and academic knowledge. As their knowledge and language base expands, students are able to read, discuss, and write about more difficult texts on the same topic. Built on the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, which involves explicit teacher modeling, guided instruction, and independent practice—tiered texts scaffold student understanding and provide background knowledge and the multiple exposures to academic vocabulary required for comprehension. The first text the teacher selects should be short, introduce students to key concepts, and be written at a level that matches students' entry level abilities. The second text selected should be longer and more challenging. It should reinforce the information and language of the first selection and transition students to the target text. Once students have developed background knowledge and the vocabulary necessary for comprehension, they will be better prepared to tackle the complex language and ideas represented in the grade-level text.

Balancing the rigor of text complexity as proposed by the CCSS with current student reading levels may seem daunting; however, through explicit instruction in vocabulary and by building background knowledge through the use of tiered texts, teachers can differentiate learning and keep students engaged while moving towards more complex reading.

Read more about scaffolding reading instruction for student engagement and understanding of complex text in the next issue of Literacy Connects.

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