

A Close Look at
**CLOSE
READING**

TEACHING STUDENTS TO
ANALYZE COMPLEX TEXTS

GRADES
6-12

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Introduction	1
1. Understanding and Evaluating Text Complexity	17
2. Understanding the Role of the Close Reader	47
3. Planning, Teaching, and Managing Close Reading	61
4. Reading Closely Across the Disciplines	103
5. Supporting Academic Communication About Closely Read Texts	137
6. Assessing to Support Meaning Making During Close Reading	177
Conclusion	205
Appendix A: A Guide for Administrators	207
Appendix B: Common Core Text Exemplar Locator	213
References	219
About the Authors	227

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 (ELA) requirements for disciplinary literacy. The Common Core’s ELA standards for grades 6–12 extend far beyond English class to disciplines including science, social science, and technical subjects, such as physical education. It’s been said that this requirement for “cross-content or schoolwide literacy—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—is perhaps the most significant change faced by middle schools and high schools” (Achieve et al., 2013, p. 4).

What does this mean for your students? It means that they will read more than ever; they will be reading more challenging, complex texts than in the past; and you will be responsible for teaching them to analyze, understand, and learn from those texts. It will require big shifts in terms of the classroom experiences you provide, the texts you use with students, the reading tasks you assign, and the way you think about your instructional practice. 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 in your discipline and in all others, 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 secondary texts and put them in order from least complex (1) to most complex (6):

- _____ *The Sound and the Fury*
- _____ *The Hunger Games*
- _____ “The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro”
- _____ “How Aerodynamics Works”
- _____ “California Launches ‘Toilet-to-Tap’ Water Purification Program”
- _____ The King James Bible

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 likely to be 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?

The Common Core’s ELA/literacy standards for grades 6–12 are arranged in three grade-level bands: grades 6–8, grades 9–10, and grades 11–12. Reading Anchor Standard 10 calls for students to read subject-appropriate narrative and informational texts that are within their specified grade-level bands. So, for example, at grades 6–8 level, the standard for informational text (RI.6.10) asserts that students will “read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010a, p. 39). When students reach the high end of a band (i.e., by the end of grade 8, grade 10, or grade 12), they are expected to be able to read texts in that band “independently and proficiently”—that is, without scaffolding.

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.
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 pp. 22–24 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, 2010–11), 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 structures, 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's the difference between text complexity and “text difficulty”?

Be careful not to confuse text complexity with text difficulty. Some texts may be just too advanced for a student to read at a particular time—meaning that the student does not have the background knowledge, language, or reading skills necessary to unravel the complex ideas an author is sharing or understand the features

the author is using to share these ideas. If it becomes clear during the close reading experience that a text you've selected for close reading is too difficult for your students—beyond their understanding of the topic, beyond their reading skill, or both—the proper response is to provide scaffolds during the experience.

These scaffolds might be additional questions you ask or an invitation for students to reread a section to focus on a perplexing word, phrase, idea, or structure. You might provide a cue or a prompt that leads students to recall previously learned information. You may need to look beyond scaffolds you originally planned and come up with new ones after observing students' annotations or listening to their conversations.

Scaffolds offered during the close reading are generally sufficient to support most students' comprehension of the text. However, if at the conclusion of the experience some students are still struggling, you will need to design additional contingency instruction that uses either the same text or a less complex text that is topically related in order to build students' background knowledge, language, and reading skills. If you do incorporate a new text, remember that it is not a substitute for the complex original but a scaffold back to it.

6. 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 “6.5” (6th grade, fifth month).

7. 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.

There is no set correspondence between Lexile levels and grade levels; it’s expected that students within a particular grade band 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 typical Lexile levels of the middle 50 percent of secondary school readers midway through each school year 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.

Figure 1.1 | **Typical Range of Lexile Levels in Secondary Readers and Common Core Stretch-Level Texts**

Grade	Mid-Year Lexile Levels of Middle 50% of Students	Text Demand of the Common Core Recommended “Stretch Level” Texts
6	665L–1000L	925L–1185L
7	735L–1065L	
8	805L–1100L	
9	855L–1165L	1050L–1335L
10	905L–1195L	
11–12	940L–1210L	1185L–1385L

Source: MetaMetrics (2014a, 2014b).

The guidelines for suggested Lexile bands in the Common Core are clearly higher than those indicating Lexile-to-grade correspondence. To experience these higher-Lexile texts in 8th grade social studies, for example, students may read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1040L), one of the Common

Core’s text exemplars listed in Appendix B of the standards document as part of a literature circle reading experience and then do a close reading from a stretch text like Raymond Bial’s *The Strength of These Arms: Life in the Slave Quarters* (1140L). By giving our students experiences with texts at these “stretch” levels, we help to prepare them for the text complexity of career and college reading materials. However, just knowing that a text is at a “stretch” Lexile is not enough; we must also consider qualitative dimensions of these texts as well as our students’ own skills and the nature of the tasks we give them.

8. 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, Elie Wiesel’s *Night* has a Lexile measure of 590L, placing it within the reading range of 2nd or 3rd graders. However, this book also contains mature content and weighty themes, addressing Nazi death camps, the death of family members, the loss of innocence, and life during the Holocaust. This text may not have complex language, but it certainly has complex themes that are beyond the grasp of most 8-year-old children. Rightfully, *Night* is a staple of high school classrooms, not elementary ones.

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.

9. 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.