

Local Assessment Toolkit: Tools for Examining Text Complexity

Karin Hess & Sheena Hervey (2010)

“The instruction and assessment of reading comprehension presents unique challenges to classroom teachers and test developers alike; and the criteria used in selecting a variety and range of appropriate texts is essential to meeting those purposes. In the classroom, students learn to apply and practice a variety of reading strategies, for different purposes and with different text types. Over time, students who are exposed to a variety of text types with increasing complexity also learn how text features differ by genre, and they gain confidence in peeling back the layers of complexity for a deeper understanding of what is read. ... Passages for reading assessment, drawn from “authentic” text whenever possible, should always include both literary and informational texts. A series of questions accompanying each reading passage may include initial understanding of text, analysis and interpretation of text, or a combination of both types of questions, especially for longer texts” (Hess & Biggam, p.1, 2004).

Criteria for determining increasing text complexity include *factors that interact* to affect the relative difficulty of texts. These factors include:

- **Length of Text** affects the ability of students to sustain engagement with the text.
- **Format and Layout of Text** includes how the text is organized, size and location of print and white space, graphics, and other book/print features (e.g., numbering, bullets, graphics and visuals) that support the organization and presentation of the information.
- **Genre and Characteristic Features of the Text.** When students have begun to generalize what is typical of each genre of text (e.g., a fable is a fantasy story with a lesson; a play presents dialogue in a way distinct from narrative texts; an essay generally begins with a thesis/proposition and lays out support for it) they are better able to anticipate how information will be organized, thus supporting their comprehension when encountering new texts.
- **Level of Reasoning Required** to interpret the author’s purpose and message can be quite complex while the actual words and sentence structure appear on the surface to simplistic. For determining this factor, consider the sophistication of themes and ideas presented, or use of abstract metaphors and other literary devices.
- **Text Structures** are the *internal organizational structures* used within paragraphs or longer texts, appropriate to genre and purpose. Research in literacy learning indicates that: a) an understanding of various text structures and their purposes enhances student’s ability to comprehend what is read; and b) that some text structures are more easily learned and understood before other more complex structures. Increasingly complex structures tend to follow this general progression: sequence (procedure), chronology (time order), description, definition, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, proposition-support, critique, and inductive-deductive. Each text structure has associated semantic cues and signal words and phrases that help readers understanding how the information is organized, as well as compose texts with greater coherence and clarity (Hess, 2008).
- **Discourse Style** (e.g., sarcasm, satire, humor) provides a view into author’s perspective, style, voice, and sometimes potential biases, as well as adding a more complex dimension of language use for readers to interpret.
- **Word Difficulty and Language Structure** includes vocabulary and sentence type and complexity of words or structure, often determined through the use of multiple readability formulas, such as Lexiles.
- **Background Knowledge and/or Degree of Familiarity with Content** needed by the reader to understand the content (e.g., historical, geographical, or literary references) will greatly inhibit or enhance comprehension depending on both the degree to which a student has read widely and discussed texts in the past (building background/world knowledge) and how well prepared they are to read a text that might require additional background knowledge for deeper comprehension (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” includes both historical and biblical references).

More about Words, Language Features, & Structure (adapted from Beck, I., McKeown, M., & Kucan, L. *Bringing Words to Life*, 2002, 2008) Also see *CCSS for ELA, Appendix A* (pages 33-35) for examples.

- **Tier 1:** Words that rarely require instructional attention in school; Familiar words with high frequency, everyday use. These words are generally of Anglo-Saxon origin and not considered a challenge for native speakers of English.
- **Tier 2:** Words with high utility; considered high frequency use for mature language users; Found across a variety of domains and texts; Vary according to age and development; Words we assume students know, but often they have only “heard” the word, (e.g., glance, confident, commotion, regret, relative, faltered) . These are words the CCSS refers to as “academic words.”
- **Tier 3:** Low frequency words, often limited to content-specific domains; Important to learn when the specific need arises; Critical for content area learning; found most often in informational texts. These are words the CCSS refers to as “domain-specific words” (e.g., lava, legislature, circumference).

Further Text Complexity Readings & Resources

Text Structures - See also: Hess, K. (2008). “Teaching and Assessing Understanding of Text Structures across Grades” [online] available: http://www.nciea.org/publications/TextStructures_KH08.pdf

Text Complexity – See also:

CCSS for ELA, Appendix A (pages 2-10). [online] available:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf

Hess, K. & Biggam, S. (2004) “A Discussion of Text Complexity, Grades K-High School” published by NH, RI, and VT Departments of Education as part of the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) Grade Level Expectations for Reading. [online] available:
http://www.nciea.org/publications/TextComplexity_KH05.pdf

“Find a Book:” This free book search utility (<http://www.lexile.com/fab>) makes it easy for young people to find books at their reading level, whether they are reading for school or for pleasure. Lexile measures match a young person’s reading ability with high-interest books at an appropriate level of difficulty to help him or her grow as a reader. The site includes a growing collection of English and Spanish fiction and nonfiction books.

On the follow pages, are a planning worksheet for examining texts, an annotated text illustrating a qualitative analysis of text complexity, followed by text complexity rubrics with descriptors of a continua of increasing complexity for informational and literary texts. Text complexity rubrics were developed and refined for use in classrooms with middle and high school teachers in NYC involved in a pilot project during the 2010-2011 school year under the direction of Sheena Hervey (AUSSIE) and Karin Hess (NCIEA).

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Planning Worksheet: Analyzing Features of Text Complexity for Instruction & Assessment

Text or text passage:

Genre:

Approximate reading time (indicate silent _____ or oral _____) Lexile _____ or Level _____

| Factors that Influence Text Complexity | Characteristics of this Text | Identify Best/Appropriate CC standards for assessment & instructional supports |
|---|---|--|
| Length of Text | | |
| Format and Layout of Text: to what degree does the text layout support comprehension? (e.g., bold key words, visuals, inset text with definitions, white space, signposts=quotation marks, sub heading) | | |
| Genre & Characteristic Features of Genre | | CC standards Supports/scaffolding |
| Level of Meaning & Reasoning Required by Reader (sophistication or complexity of themes or ideas presented) | <i>Theme(s)/Key Concept(s)</i> <i>Explicit-Implied Purposes</i> | CC standards Supports/scaffolding |
| Text Structure (sequence, chronology, description, definition, compare-contrast, cause-effect, problem-solution, proposition-support, judgment/critique, inductive-deductive) & Discourse Style (sarcasm, satire, irony, humor, etc.) | <i>Text Structure(s)</i> <i>Semantic cues/signal words</i> <i>Discourse style(employs use of literary devices)</i> | CC standards Supports/scaffolding |
| Words, Language Features, & Structure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word length, word frequency • Sentence length; transitions • Potential levels of meaning (single-multiple; explicit-implicit) • Precise/nuanced meaning • Domain-specific | <i>Tier 2 words-academic words (precise, contextual, literal-figurative, archaic)</i> <i>Tier 3 words (technical, content/domain-specific)</i> | CC standards Supports/scaffolding |
| Background Knowledge Demands or Degree of Familiarity with Content Required (prior knowledge, multiple perspectives, embedded citations) | <i>Embedded references (literary, historical, cultural, economical, political, etc.)</i> | CC standards Supports/scaffolding |

Introduction to Bearing Witness: Portraits of Americans Dreaming

Introduction to Americans Dreaming

Since its founding in 1776, the United States has promoted itself as the land of opportunity. In the early years of the nation, the dream was tied to the widespread availability of land. Over time, it has evolved to signal a person's ability, through effort, to achieve prosperity regardless of their origins. In addition, it is the opportunity to make individual choices without the prior restrictions that limited people according to their class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity. At its most expansive, the dream includes the belief that one's children will grow up safe, healthy, and educated; that they will become capable of a career and even greater prosperity, without barriers due to class, race or gender.

The term "American Dream" was first used by historian [James Truslow Adams](#) in his book *Epic of America* (1931):

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the [European upper classes](#) to interpret adequately, also too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of [social order](#) in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous [circumstances](#) of birth or position.

Adams also wrote:

The American Dream...that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class.

[Martin Luther King](#) used the concept of the American Dream to anchor the Civil Rights movement. In his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963), he wrote:

We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands. . . . when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

This dream has not been easy to sustain and realize. Some would say that it is a myth – even a mirage – that eludes most Americans. Numerous authors, such as [Sinclair Lewis](#) in his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, satirized the materialism and shallowness that he saw in the chase for the American dream. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway describes how the pursuit of opportunity became "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." In 1949 [Arthur Miller](#) wrote the play "[Death of a Salesman](#)" in which the American Dream is portrayed as a fruitless pursuit that destroys and deludes.

Complex sentences with subordinate clauses and transitions

Archaic language

Figurative language

Meaning includes more complex concepts and a higher level of detail and while is implicit throughout the text, is explicitly stated at the end

Quotes with minimal signposting

Complex sentences with multiple concepts

vocabulary with multiple meaning

Obscure citations 4

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Text Complexity Rubric *Sample Descriptors* for Bearing Witness: Portraits of Americans

| | Simple Texts | Somewhat Complex Texts | Complex Texts | Very Complex Texts |
|---------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Layout | Consistent placement of text, regular word and lines spacing often large plain font | May have longer passages of uninterrupted text, often plain font | Longer passages of uninterrupted text may include columns or other variations in layout, often smaller more elaborate font | Very long passages of uninterrupted text that may include columns or other variations in layout, often small densely packed print |
| | Graphics and pictures that directly support and help interpret the written text | Graphs, pictures, tables, charts that directly support the text | Essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, formula (necessary to make meaning of text) | Extensive, intricate, essential integrated tables, charts, formulas necessary to make meaning of text |
| | Simple indexes, glossaries | Indexes, glossaries, occasional quotes, references | Quotes, including appendices, indexes, glossaries, bibliography | Abstracts, footnotes, citations and detailed indexes, appendices, bibliography |
| | Supportive signposting and enhancements | Reduced signposting and enhancements | Minimal signposting and/or enhancements | Integrated signposting conforming to disciplinary formats. No enhancements |
| Purpose and Meaning | A single or simple purpose conveying clear or factual information | Purpose involves conveying a range of more detailed information | Purpose includes explaining or interpreting information | Purpose may include examining/evaluating complex, sometimes theoretical and contested information |
| | Meaning is clear, concrete with a narrow focus | Meaning is more involved with a broader focus | Meaning includes more complex concepts and a higher level of detail | Meaning is intricate, with abstract theoretical elements |
| Structure | The organization of the text is clear or chronological and/or easy to predict | The organization of the text may include a thesis or reasoned explanation in addition to facts | The organization of the text may contain multiple pathways, more than one thesis and/or several genres | The organization of the text is intricate or specialized for a particular discipline |
| | Connections between ideas, processes or events are explicit and clear. | Connections between some ideas, processes or events are implicit or subtle | Connections between an extended range of ideas, processes or events are deeper and often implicit or subtle | Connections between an extensive range of ideas, processes or events are deep, intricate and often implicit or subtle |
| | One text type is evident | Includes different text types | Includes different text types of varying complexity | Includes sustained complex text types and/or specialized, hybrid text types |
| Language Features | Mainly simple sentences | Simple and compound sentences with some more complex constructions | Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses or transition words | Mainly complex sentences, often containing multiple concepts |
| | Simple language style, sometimes with narrative elements | Increased objective style and passive constructions with higher factual content | Objective/passive style with higher conceptual content and increasing nominalization | Specialized disciplinary style with dense conceptual content and high nominalization |
| | Vocabulary is mostly familiar | Vocabulary includes some unfamiliar, context-dependent words | Includes much academic vocabulary and some domain-specific (content) vocabulary | Includes extensive academic and domain-specific (content) vocabulary |
| Knowledge Demands Informational | General topic is familiar, with details known by reader | General topic is familiar, with some details new to reader | General topic is somewhat familiar but with many details unknown to reader | General topic is mostly unfamiliar with most details unknown to reader |
| | Simple, concrete ideas | Both simple and more complicated, abstract ideas | A range of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts | Many new ideas and/or complex, challenging abstract and theoretical concepts |

Gradients in Complexity: Text Complexity Rubric for Informational Texts

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| | <i>Simple Texts</i> [1] | <i>Somewhat Complex Texts</i> [2] | <i>Complex Texts</i> [3] | <i>Very Complex Texts</i> [4] |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Layout | Consistent placement of text, regular word and line spacing, often large plain font | May have longer passages of uninterrupted text, often plain font | Longer passages of uninterrupted text may include columns or other variations in layout, often smaller more elaborate font | Very long passages of uninterrupted text that may include columns or other variations in layout, often small densely packed print |
| | Graphics, captioned photos, labelled diagrams that directly support and help interpret the written text | Graphs, photos, tables, charts, diagrams that directly support the text | Essential integrated graphics, tables, charts, formulas (necessary to make meaning of text) | Extensive/complex, intricate, essential integrated tables, charts, formulas necessary to make connections or synthesize concepts presented |
| | Simple indexes, short glossaries | Indexes, glossaries, occasional quotes, references | Embedded quotes, concluding appendices, indexes, glossaries, bibliography | Abstracts, footnotes, citations and detailed indexes, appendices, bibliography |
| | Supportive signposting and enhancements | Reduced signposting and enhancements | Minimal signposting and/or enhancements | Integrated signposting conforming to disciplinary formats. No enhancements |
| Purpose and Meaning | A single or simple purpose conveying clear or factual information | Purpose involves conveying a range of ideas with more detailed information or examples | Purpose includes explaining or interpreting information, not just presenting it | Purpose may include examining/evaluating complex, sometimes theoretical and contested information |
| | Meaning is clear, concrete with a narrow focus | Meaning is more involved with a broader focus | Meaning includes more complex concepts and a higher level of detail | Meaning is intricate, with abstract theoretical elements |
| Structure/Discourse | The discourse style & organization of the text is clear or chronological and/or easy to predict | The organization of the text may include a thesis or reasoned explanation in addition to facts | The organization of the text may contain multiple pathways, more than one thesis and/or several genres | The organization of the text is intricate or specialized for a particular discipline or genre. |
| | Connections between ideas, processes or events are explicit and clear. | Connections between some ideas, processes or events are implicit or subtle | Connections between an expanded range ideas, processes or events are deeper and often implicit or subtle. | Connections between an extensive range ideas, processes or events are deep, intricate and often implicit or subtle. |
| | One primary text structure is evident (e.g., sequence, description) | Includes a main text structure with 1-2 embedded structures | Includes different text structure types of varying complexity | Includes sustained complex text structure types and/or specialized, hybrid text types |
| Language Features | Mainly simple sentences | Simple and compound sentences with some more complex constructions | Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses or transition words | Mainly complex sentences, often containing multiple concepts |
| | Simple language style, sometimes with narrative elements | Increased objective style and passive constructions with higher factual content | Objective/passive style with higher conceptual content and increasing nominalization | Specialized disciplinary style with dense conceptual content and high nominalization |
| | Vocabulary is mostly familiar | Includes some unfamiliar, context-dependent or multiple meaning words | Includes much academic (nuanced) vocabulary and/or some domain specific (content) vocabulary | Includes extensive academic (nuanced, precise) and/or domain specific (content) vocabulary |
| Bk Knowledge Demands Informational | General topic is familiar, with details known by reader | General topic is familiar, with some details new to reader (cultural, historical, literary, political, legal, etc.) | General topic is somewhat familiar but with many details unknown to reader (cultural, historical, literary, political, legal, etc.) | General topic is mostly unfamiliar with most details unknown to reader (cultural, historical, literary, political, legal, etc.) |
| | Simple, concrete ideas | Both simple and more complicated, abstract ideas | A range of recognizable ideas and challenging abstract concepts | Many new ideas, perspectives and/or complex, challenging, abstract and theoretical concepts |

Gradients in Complexity: Text Complexity Rubric for Literary Texts

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| | <i>Simple Texts</i> [1] | <i>Somewhat Complex Texts</i> [2] | <i>Complex Texts</i> [3] | <i>Very Complex Texts</i> [4] |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| Layout | Consistent placement of text, regular word and line spacing, often large plain font | May have longer passages of uninterrupted text, often plain font | Longer passages of uninterrupted text may include columns or other variations in layout, often smaller more elaborate font | Very long passages of uninterrupted text that may include columns or other variations in layout, often small densely packed print |
| | Numerous illustrations that directly support and help interpret the written text | A range of illustrations that support selected parts of the text | A few illustrations that support the text OR includes images that require some interpretation | Minimal or no illustrations that support the text OR includes images/text layout that require deeper interpretation (e.g., symbolism or recursive reading) |
| | Supportive signposting and enhancements | Reduced signposting and enhancements | Minimal signposting and/or enhancements | Integrated signposting conforming to literary devices. No enhancements |
| Purpose and Meaning | Purpose usually stated explicitly in the title or in the beginning of the text | Purpose tends to be revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety | Purpose is implicit and may be revealed over the entirety of the text | Purpose implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text |
| | One level of meaning | More than one level of meaning, with levels clearly distinguished from each other | Several levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify/separate | Several levels and competing elements of meaning that are difficult to identify/separate and interpret |
| | Theme is obvious and revealed early in the text | Theme is clear and revealed early in the text, but may be conveyed with some subtlety | Theme may be implicit or subtle, is sometimes ambiguous and may be revealed over the entirety of the text | Theme is implicit or subtle, is often ambiguous, and is revealed over the entirety of the text |
| Structure/ Discourse | The discourse style & organization of the text is clear, chronological and/or easy to predict or follow | The organization of the text may have additional characters, two or more storylines and is occasionally difficult to predict | The organization of the text may include, subplots, time shifts and more complex characters | The organization of the text is intricate with regard to elements such as narrative viewpoint, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail |
| | Connections between events or ideas are explicit and clear. | Connections among events or ideas are sometimes implicit or subtle | Connections among events or ideas are often implicit or subtle | Connections among events or ideas are implicit or subtle throughout the text. |
| | One primary text structure is evident (e.g., chronology) | Includes a main text structure with 1-2 embedded structures | Includes different text types of varying complexity | Includes sustained complex text types and hybrid or non-linear texts |
| Language Features | Mainly short, simple sentences | Simple and compound sentences with some more complex constructions | Many complex sentences with increased subordinate phrases and clauses | Many complex sentences, often containing intricate detail or concepts |
| | Simple, literal language; predictable | Mainly literal, common language | Some figurative or literary language | Much figurative language or use of literary devices (metaphor, analogy, connotative language literary allusion, etc.) |
| | Vocabulary is mostly familiar for grade level; frequently appearing words | Some unfamiliar or context-dependent, multiple meaning words | Includes much academic vocabulary and some domain specific (content) vocabulary | Includes extensive academic and domain specific (content) vocabulary, and possibly archaic language |
| Bk Knowledge Demands Fiction | Minimal assumed personal experience or background knowledge needed | Some assumed personal experience and/or knowledge of cultural or historical or ideas | Much assumed personal experience and/or explicit references to cultural, historical, literary, or political knowledge | Extensive, demanding, assumed personal experience and implied cultural, historical, literary, or political knowledge |
| | Simple, straightforward ideas | Both simple and more complex ideas | A range of recognizable ideas and challenging concepts or themes | Many new ideas, perspectives, and/or complex, challenging concepts |