What Is Text Complexity?

Achieving Results Through the Common Core State Standards

What Is College and Career Readiness (CCR)?
A primary goal of the Common Core State Standards for Grades K–12 is to develop active, thoughtful, and engaged learners who are able to embrace the benefits and challenges of the 21st century, both in school and in the workplace. So what does this learner look like?

College and career ready students . . .
- Demonstrate the ability to read complex text independently
- Possess strong content knowledge
- Respond to a range of texts covering many genres and topics
- Comprehend, critique, and value evidence
- Employ technology
- Understand other cultures and perspectives

How Does Text Complexity Develop College and Career Readiness?

Defining Text Complexity
In order to become college and career ready, students need to read increasingly complex texts as they progress through Grades K–12, and they need the strategies to comprehend these texts.

The standards provide a three-part model to gauge how easy or difficult a particular text is to read. Each part of the model is of equal importance. As outlined in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards, the three parts are:

- **Quantitative**
  The quantitative measure is typically calculated by computer software. Quantitative measures assess word length, word frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion. These include the Dale-Chall Readability Formula, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test, and the Lexile Framework for Reading.

- **Qualitative**
  The qualitative measure is best addressed by an attentive human reader. Qualitative factors include levels of meaning (literary texts) or purpose (informational texts), text structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.

- **Reader and Task**
  This measure focuses on the individual reader and the task or purpose for reading. By using a student’s motivation, knowledge, and experience; the complexity of the task; and the teacher’s professional judgment; a teacher is able to determine how appropriate a text may be for that specific student. These measures of text complexity are further developed on pages 57–59.
Reading Complex Texts

Using Text Exemplars

Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards provides lists of text exemplars (or model texts) across Grades K–12. While these texts do not represent a partial or complete reading list for any grade band, they serve the following purposes:

- Text exemplars at each grade band provide examples of the levels of complex text and the quality of texts with which all students should interact in order to achieve the goals set forth in the standards.
- Each grade band provides the breadth of texts, e.g. informational, literary, and poetry, that students should read in the particular grade band.
- The exemplar texts serve as guideposts to help educators choose texts of appropriate complexity and quality for their classrooms.

Making Sense of Complex Text

A commonly accepted measure of text difficulty is a quantitative readability score such as one that can be determined by using the Lexile, Dale-Chall, or Spache formula. These formulas are found on the Internet and involve analyzing a portion of text for average sentence length, difficulty of vocabulary, and word frequency. However, numbers arrived at by using one of these formulas should not be the sole measure by which a text is determined to be grade-level appropriate. After all, a low readability score can be heavily influenced by short sentence length without consideration of the text’s subject matter or theme.

To better gauge a text’s difficulty, the Common Core State Standards tell us we should also take into account certain qualitative measures and reader-task considerations when determining whether a text is appropriate for a student or group of students.

The Common Core State Standards’ three-part model for measuring text complexity (pictured here) provides a balance among qualitative measures, reader-task considerations, and quantitative measures to achieve an overall text complexity recommendation. By using these text complexity measures, both quantitative and qualitative, and by taking into account the reader and the assigned task, teachers can support and challenge students to read more complex texts as they move toward college and career readiness.
So what are these quantitative and qualitative measures, and how can a teacher accurately assess text complexity? As mentioned above, in the Common Core model, quantitative measures include the computer-measured readability level or Lexile, the Average Sentence Length in the selection, the Word Frequency, and, at Grade 1, the Word Count of a selection. Qualitative measures include a selection's Levels of Meaning, its Structure, the degree of Language Conventionality and Clarity, and Theme and Knowledge Demands required of students before they read the selection. Reader-Task Suggestions are included to address variables specific to particular readers. All of the selections in *Scott Foresman Reading Street* have been analyzed for text complexity. Each selection's text complexity information is available on the tab at the beginning of that week's lesson. In the following section we'll discuss how to determine the text complexity of other texts your students may read.

**Measuring Text Complexity**

The goal in increasing text complexity is to build capacity for all students. Using the Common Core model, we can measure a text's complexity by incorporating these measures:

1. **Quantitative Measures**

   - Overall quantitative text difficulty can be determined by a readability formula. Frequently used readability formulas include Lexile, Dale-Chall, and Spache.
   - Sentence Length is determined by averaging the number of words in each sentence in a selection.
   - Word Frequency refers to how often the same words appear in a text. A low score indicates that the text most likely has words that students may not have encountered.

   - The following chart, developed by Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert, shows grade level word frequency spans and average sentence length for narrative and informational texts. These are based on an analysis of the text exemplars listed in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards.

   **Grade Band**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Band</th>
<th>Lexile Ranges aligned to CCR expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K–1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>450–790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>770–980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–8</td>
<td>955–1155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRADE</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Frequency</td>
<td>3.7–3.9</td>
<td>3.6–3.8</td>
<td>3.5–3.8</td>
<td>3.4–3.7</td>
<td>3.3–3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Length</td>
<td>8–10 words</td>
<td>9–11 words</td>
<td>10–12 words</td>
<td>11–13 words</td>
<td>12–14 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational Text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Frequency</td>
<td>3.6–3.8</td>
<td>3.5–3.75</td>
<td>3.4–3.6</td>
<td>3.3–3.6</td>
<td>3.3–3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Length</td>
<td>9–11 words</td>
<td>10–12 words</td>
<td>11–13 words</td>
<td>12–14 words</td>
<td>13–16 words</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative Measures

Using qualitative measures to assess text complexity means making informed decisions about how difficult a text is to read. Consider the factors below when matching texts to students:

- **Levels of Meaning** Does the text have one single level of meaning (as in informational text), or does it contain hidden levels of meaning (as in the use of symbolism)? Texts with a single level of meaning are easier to comprehend.

- **Structure** How complex is the structure of the text? Is the story told in chronological order, or are there flashbacks and other manipulations of time? Is the informational text laid out in a simple format of a main idea with details and simple graphics to help convey meaning? Or is the purpose of the text not immediately obvious?

- **Language Conventionality and Clarity** Does the text contain language that is familiar, clear, and straightforward; or does it contain lots of academic language and words with multiple meanings? This will affect how easy the text is to read.

- **Theme and Knowledge Demands** How much background knowledge will a student need in order to understand the selection? Texts that don’t make assumptions about a student’s life experiences or familiarity with discipline-specific concepts are easier to understand.

Reader-Task Considerations

In addition to using quantitative and qualitative factors when matching texts to students, it is important to consider the student’s needs, interests, and abilities, and the task the student is asked to complete, when deciding whether a text is appropriate for him or her.
The Text Complexity Rubric in Reading Street

The selection Life in the Forest is featured in Scott Foresman Reading Street as a Grade 1 title. The placement of this selection relies on many factors as depicted in the measures in the following rubric and annotations. You can find the text-complexity information for each selection in Reading Street on the tab at the beginning of each lesson in the Teacher’s Edition.

We have analyzed the Qualitative and Quantitative measures and provided Reader-Task Considerations to address the complexity of this text. Remember to alter the Reader-Task Considerations to apply specifically to your classroom needs.

1 Quantitative Measures
   ■ Lexile The Lexile score for this selection is 370L. That score combined with the average sentence length, word frequency, and word count in this text make it appropriate for placement at this level.
   ■ Average Sentence Length: 6.97
   ■ Word Frequency: 3.27
   ■ Word Count: 216

2 Qualitative Measures
   ■ Levels of Meaning Children need to be able to identify factual information in expository text.
   ■ Structure To comprehend Life in the Forest, children should be comfortable with reading text in various locations on the page. Captions supply additional information.
   ■ Language Conventionality and Clarity The text uses familiar, clear language, and the illustrations support text meaning.
   ■ Theme and Knowledge Demands Most children should be able to grasp the meaning of the text without prior knowledge, except for understanding what a forest is.

3 Reader-Task Suggestions
   Based on each child’s assessment results, use the Reader-Task Suggestions from the Text Complexity rubric to provide background knowledge or scaffold the selection.
Bridge to Complex Knowledge

Quantitative Measures

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lexile</td>
<td>370L</td>
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Qualitative Measures

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levels of Meaning</td>
<td>identify factual information in expository text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>captions; text is placed in a variety of locations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Conventionality and Clarity</td>
<td>clear language; close alignment of images and text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme and Knowledge Demands</td>
<td>text assumes no prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reader-Task Suggestions

**FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT** Based on assessment results, use the Reader and Task Suggestions in Access Main Selection to scaffold the selection or support independence for students as they read *Life in the Forest*.

**READER AND TASK SUGGESTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparing to Read the Text</th>
<th>Leveled Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Review strategies for understanding the context clues. Refer to the vocabulary strategy lesson on p. 146a.</td>
<td><strong>Levels of Meaning</strong> If children have difficulty with the key ideas and details, have them name the animals in the photographs and identify the similarities and differences among them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Discuss text features an author might use to organize information in an expository text.</td>
<td><strong>Structure</strong> The complex structure of this text may pose a problem for some children. Point out to children that they must read the captions too to gain deep understanding of the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Remind children that this selection is nonfiction. They may need to read more slowly to better understand the text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommended Placement This text is appropriate for placement at this level due to both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the selection.
Ask the Expert
About Exemplar Texts

Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert has been involved in the development of the Common Core State Standards and has written extensively on the topics of text complexity and exemplar texts. Her Web site, http://www.textproject.org/, provides a wealth of information on how to improve literacy levels of beginning and struggling readers.

Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards provides lists of exemplar texts at each grade band and sample performance tasks for these texts. We asked Dr. Hiebert to discuss the role of these exemplar texts in the regular reading/language arts classroom.

What are exemplar texts, and why are they provided in the Common Core State Standards?

Text Exemplars are selections of a variety of genres, including novels, stories, informational text, and poetry. At Grades K–3, read aloud stories, read aloud poetry, and read aloud informational texts are also included. These texts are considered strong examples of “the level of complexity and quality” that students need to read beginning in kindergarten and continuing through Grade 12 in order to attain college and career readiness. These texts also represent the breadth of texts that students should encounter in elementary and high school. Text selections at each grade-level band are based on complexity, quality, and range.

Do the standards require a teacher to use all of the text exemplars listed for a given grade level?

The standards do not require classroom teachers to use any or all of the text exemplars listed at a given grade band. While teachers may choose texts listed in each grade-band bibliography, these texts are not meant to serve as a mandate or prescriptive for a language arts curriculum at any grade level. They are intended to serve as examples of the kinds of reading that students should encounter at each grade band. The purpose of the exemplars is to exemplify, to demonstrate, and to provide guidance for teachers as they choose texts that increase their students’ capacities to read complex texts. This will enable students to develop as critical thinkers who are ready for the challenges of college and beyond.

“Text selections at each grade-level band are based on complexity, quality, and range.”
The text of the Common Core State Standards states the following:

“The following text samples primarily serve to exemplify the level of complexity and quality that the Standards require all students in a given grade band to engage with. Additionally, they are suggestive of the breadth of texts that students should encounter in the text types required by the Standards. The choices should serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality, and range for their own classrooms. They expressly do not represent a partial or complete reading list.” Common Core State Standards Appendix B, page 2

What are the performance tasks?

The performance tasks included in Appendix B provide examples of how teachers can scaffold instruction as they apply the standards using complex texts, both literary and informational. Like the text exemplars themselves, the performance tasks are intended to guide teachers as they develop new instructional strategies to meet the goals of the Common Core State Standards.

Read the following example that illustrates how the standards and the performance tasks work together to build instruction when listening to *Fire! Fire!* by Gail Gibbons.

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**Common Core State Standard**

**Reading Informational Text Grade 1**

1. Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

**Performance Task**

After listening to Gail Gibbon’s *Fire! Fire!*, students ask questions about how firefighters respond to a fire and answer using key details from the text.

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**Does Scott Foresman Reading Street provide lesson plans for the exemplar texts?**

The Pearson Trade Book Library provides lesson plans for many of the selections listed on the exemplar text lists at all grade bands. Available lesson plans are located on the Pearson Leveled Reader Database.