

## The Challenges of Text Complexity and why Sequencing Texts Matters

A common goal of college-and career-ready standards is that all students leaving high school should be able to “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently”. Another important goal in the post-Common Core Standards era is that our students master challenging subject matter in core content areas. This kind of knowledge is critical in order for our students to be successful in college, or to move seamlessly into careers after high school.

Yet many students who graduate from high school are not prepared for their next steps. Why is this so?

While textual demands of college material have remained relatively consistent over the past 50 years, the complexity of texts in the K-12 environment has steadily decreased during the same timeframe. This has resulted in high numbers of students requiring reading remediation at the college level, many students struggling to complete college level work, and a growing number of students who fail to finish degree programs.

Given these outcomes, the current focus on increasing text complexity in K-12 grades is an essential part of the current educational reform. It also begs the question: what is complex text and how do we support students in their efforts to access it?

Text complexity analysis relies on a three-part measure:

1. Quantitative – generally measured by Lexile calculation
2. Qualitative- these measures include text structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands and levels of meaning and purpose
3. Reader and Task- the interest, motivation, and background knowledge an individual reader brings to the reading task

Over the last several years a great deal of attention has been paid to the first two measures, Quantitative and Qualitative

Complexity, but less has been written about Reader and Task. This is particularly curious when one considers that nearly every modern theory of comprehension clearly demonstrates the role of background knowledge in understanding text (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987; Bloom, 1976; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Pressley, Wood, & Woloshyn, 1992; Spivy, 1996).

Consider the idea that because comprehension and analytic writing are so dependent on prior knowledge, students who have limited knowledge of a topic have difficulty comprehending much of what they read, and difficulty writing about what they read. This is where the impact of gradated text—texts that are focused on a single topic and sequenced in complexity—can most dramatically benefit our students’ comprehension.

The new standards target building student access to grade-level complex text and ensuring students can express understanding of that text clearly and concisely through writing and speaking, using appropriate textual evidence. The expectation is that close engagement with text will help students build deep content knowledge about important topics in the real world. If background knowledge plays a key role in helping students’ access the most challenging texts efficiently and effectively, why not use a gradated sequence of texts around important topics that impact the students’ world and daily lives?

Reading less challenging texts on a topic helps students build background knowledge that will scaffold them as they work to access more challenging texts. As students read through a text sequence, commonly in a text set built around an anchor text and topic, they are acquiring the vocabulary and seminal ideas and knowledge that will assist them in gaining deep comprehension of the more complex, more challenging texts in a given text set.

Sequenced or gradated texts are an important tool for teachers in planning close reading lessons that will help students climb the staircase of complexity and allow them to meet the demands of college and career ready reading and writing.

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