

By Nancy E. Marchand-Martella, Ph.D.
& Ronald C. Martella, Ph.D.



TEXT COMPLEXITY AND CLOSE READING:
BEST PRACTICES FOR ADOLESCENT LEARNERS

**Text Complexity and Close Reading:
Best Practices for Adolescent Learners**

“There is always something worthy of our attention in reading instruction. It seems that text complexity is now having its day” (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012, p. 1). The purpose of this paper is to discuss best practices for adolescent learners with particular emphasis on text complexity. An overview of adolescent reading is provided along with statistics of how adolescents perform in reading. Further, discussions of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and their emphasis on text complexity as well as close reading are provided.

OVERVIEW

Without a doubt, learning to read with understanding is the most important skill students can acquire in school. Reading is tied to all other academic areas. Unfortunately, the vast majority of upper elementary and middle school students struggle reading grade-level text with ease and understanding. The 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress findings in reading showed only 34% of fourth-grade students scored at or above the proficient level. For eighth graders, only 27% of students scored at or above the proficient level (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013). Similar findings were noted for students in grade 12. Students scoring at the “proficient” level “demonstrate solid academic performance and competency over challenging subject matter” (NCES, 2013, p. 7). Thus, “it is easy to summon the language of crisis in discussing adolescent literacy” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007, p. 1). The development of solid literacy skills is a central tenet of educational reform efforts for good reason: reading difficulties are associated with dropping out of school, unemployment, and diminished success in completing college (Brozo, 2009).

The International Reading Association (IRA) (2012) provides an executive summary of adolescent literacy instruction. The IRA notes that in the 21st century, adolescents should be expected to read a variety of more complex texts. “Educators need to help adolescents learn how to link the appropriate literacy strategies with the specific text structures” (p. 4). Further, the IRA notes adolescents deserve content-area strategies designed to meet the demands of particular disciplines, a systematic and comprehensive approach to increasing literacy achievement, access to and instruction with multiple texts, differentiated literacy instruction specific to their individual needs, opportunities to participate in oral communication within literacy-based activities, use of literacy in pursuit of civic engagement, assessments that highlight strengths and challenges, and a wide variety of print and non-print materials.

To tackle U.S. literacy difficulties and to enhance college and career readiness, the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts (CCSS ELA, 2012), a national standards initiative encompassing 46 states and 3 territories, were implemented (see www.corestandards.org for further details). In fact, according to Cassidy and Grote-Garcia (2013), the CCSS are the “hottest topic” identified by literacy experts for emphasis in 2014. Students who meet the CCSS ELA become more literate individuals who are ready to handle the complex literacy demands to become college and career ready. Students “demonstrate independence; build strong content knowledge; respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline; comprehend as well as critique; value evidence; use technology and digital media strategically and capably; and come to understand other perspectives and cultures” (CCSS ELA, p. 7).



When literacy instruction is provided to adolescent learners, it should include careful consideration of text complexity and close reading (see Figure 1). Each of these topics is described below.

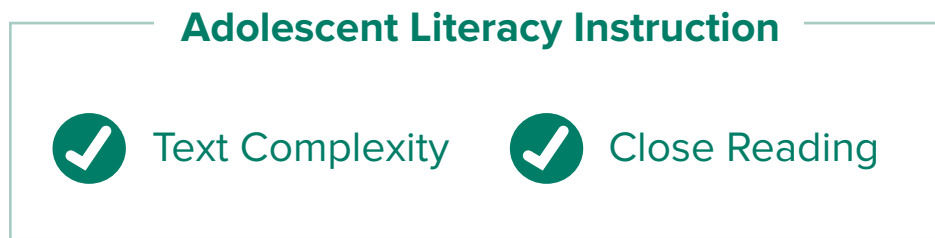


Figure 1: Important considerations for adolescent literacy instruction.

TEXT COMPLEXITY

A key feature of the CCSS ELA is an emphasis on text complexity and the growth of comprehension. According to the CCSS ELA,

the Reading standards place equal emphasis on the sophistication of what students read and the skill with which they read. Standard 10 defines a grade-by-grade ‘staircase’ of increasing text complexity that rises from beginning reading to the college and career readiness level. Whatever they are reading, students must also show a steadily growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of text, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts, considering a wider range of textual evidence, and becoming more sensitive to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and poor reasoning in texts. (p. 8)

Further, a note on range and content of student reading was provided in the CCSS ELA document:

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. Students also acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success. (p. 10)

In Appendix A of the CCSS ELA, a discussion of why text complexity matters is provided. It all started with the college admissions test, the ACT, Inc., and their 2006 report entitled *Reading Between the Lines*. This report noted that those students who equaled or exceeded benchmark scores on the ACT were better

able to answer questions associated with complex text (note: complex text was rated on a 3-point rubric with qualitative and quantitative evaluations of text and a match between reader and task—see a more thorough discussion below). The most important implication of this study was that teachers need to move beyond teaching higher-order or critical thinking strategies—“what students could read, in terms of its complexity, was at least as important as what they could do with what they read” (CCSS ELA, Appendix A, p. 2). Unfortunately, there has been a steady decline in the complexity levels of text students read. Williamson (2006) (as cited in CCSS ELA, Appendix A) found a 350 Lexile difference between end-of-high-school and beginning-college-level text; this gap amounts to a 1.5 standard deviation difference.

Criticism surrounds the decreased use of informational text and the lower complexity of informational text when it is used. Too often teachers provide high levels of assistance without scaffolding to independence, too much collaborative discussion, and text that is less complex, with the inclusion of summaries, glossaries, and enhanced text features to reduce text complexity. Unless text complexity is stressed early and then faded to ensure student independence, it does students no favors when text complexity is diminished in this way, and the goal of promoting college and career readiness is ill-served.

A turning away from complex texts is likely to lead to a general impoverishment of knowledge, which, because knowledge is intimately linked with reading comprehension ability, will accelerate the decline in the ability to comprehend complex texts and the decline in the richness of text itself. This bodes ill for the ability of Americans to meet the demands placed upon them by citizenship in a democratic republic and the challenges of a highly competitive global marketplace of goods, services, and ideas. (CCSS ELA, Appendix A, p. 4)

Further, according to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2010), “because so many high school graduates are not prepared for college-level coursework, most colleges and university now must offer costly remedial reading programs” (p. 5).

Therefore, focused work using complex text is a must, particularly as we move into the upper grades (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013). Snow and Moje (2010) described the widespread and misguided assumption that we should finish reading instruction by the end of third grade. They coined the term “inoculation fallacy” to dispel the belief that an early vaccination of reading instruction, especially in grades K–3, will protect students from reading failure. Zygouris-Coe (2012a) spoke of literacy “neglect” for older students given the inoculation fallacy. The IRA and the National Middle School Association (2002) called for increased attention over ten years ago, stating, “middle school students deserve continued and systematic instruction in reading” (p. 2). The National Governors Association (2005) followed up by noting young people need more advanced literacy skills to compete in our global information economy. We must continue literacy instruction beyond grade 3 and ramp up our efforts using more complex text.



Fisher and Frey (2012a) provide a cautionary note related to text complexity and struggling readers. The problem is that the same, more complex text may not be appropriate for all students at the same moment in time. The text will not be a perfect match for every student without careful instructional intervention. Students should be exposed to more difficult text with careful teacher modeling and support.

To determine what complex text is, the CCSS ELA note three inter-related aspects of text complexity (see Fisher & Frey, 2012b; Fisher et al., 2012; and Hiebert, 2012 for in-depth discussions of the three aspects of text complexity—qualitative dimensions, quantitative measures, and reader and task considerations; Hiebert notes what librarians need to know and do to support literacy efforts related to these aspects in our schools).

Qualitative dimensions of text complexity relate to:

- levels of meaning (literacy texts) or purposes (from single level of meaning to multiple levels of meaning and from explicitly stated purposes to implicit ones that may be hidden or obscure);
- structure (from simple to complex; from explicit to implicit; from conventional to unconventional; including events related in chronological order to those not in chronological order; with traits of common genres to traits of specific disciplines; with simple to more sophisticated graphics and with graphics supplementary or more crucial to conveying meaning of text);
- language conventionality and clarity (from literal to figurative; clear to ambiguous; contemporary to archaic; and conversational to domain-specific);
- knowledge demands (life experiences in literary texts) (simple themes to more sophisticated ones; single themes to multiple themes; common everyday experiences to those vastly different from one’s own; perspectives like one’s own to those unlike or in opposition to one’s own);
- knowledge demands (cultural/literary knowledge in literary texts) (everyday knowledge and familiarity with conventions required for cultural and literary knowledge; low intertextuality to high intertextuality with many references to other texts); and
- knowledge demands (content/disciplinary knowledge in informational text) (everyday knowledge and familiarity with genre conventions is required to content knowledge is required; low intertextuality to high intertextuality)

Quantitative measures relate to readability formulas that consider word length, sentence length, familiar and unfamiliar words, and text length (see Lexiles as one metric). Lexile stretch bands were developed to address the concerns over complex text. Table 1, below, delineates the stretch bands.

Table 1: Lexile® Stretch Ranges

Grade	2012 CCSS Text Measures (Stretch)
BR	N/A
1	190L to 530L
2	420L to 650L
3	520L to 820L
4	740L to 940L
5	830L to 1010L
6	925L to 1070L
7	970L to 1120L
8	1010L to 1185L
9	1050L to 1260L
10	1080L to 1335L
11 & 12	1185L to 1385L

Lexile® data source: MetaMetrics Inc. (2013).



Reader and task considerations relate to teachers' ability to employ professional judgment to match text with particular students' needs.

For example, harder texts may be appropriate for highly knowledgeable or skilled readers, and easier texts may be suitable as an expedient for building struggling readers' knowledge or reading skill up to the level required by the Standards. Highly motivated readers are often willing to put in the extra effort required to read harder texts that tell a story or contain information in which they are deeply interested. Complex tasks may require the kind of information contained only in similarly complex texts. (CCSS ELA, Appendix A, p. 7)

Thus, when providing text opportunities for students, we must consider all aspects of text—namely, qualitative dimensions, quantitative measures, and reader and task considerations. Only then can we ensure we are moving in the right direction for preparing students for 21st century literacy challenges.

CLOSE READING

The use of close reading within complex text is noted in the CCSS ELA:

Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. (p. 3)

Further, close reading is noted in anchor standard #1 for *Key Ideas and Details*: “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (p. 10). Close reading requires a major focus on having readers read and discuss text because “challenging texts do not give up their meanings easily” (Shanahan, 2012, p. 1). The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, 2011) notes the importance of close reading when it comes to interacting with complex text:

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. Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. Close, analytic reading entails the careful

gathering of observations about a text and careful consideration about what those observations taken together add up to — from the smallest linguistic matters to larger issues of overall understanding and judgment. Reading complex text also encompasses the productive comparison and synthesis of ideas. Readers use the meaning developed through the analysis of particular words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs to elaborate on the connections among ideas across multiple texts. Once each source is read and understood, students can give attention to integrating what they have recently read with readings they have previously encountered and knowledge they have previously acquired. By drawing on relevant prior knowledge, students can make comparisons between what they have just read to previous learning and assess how the text expands or challenges that knowledge. Comparison and synthesis of ideas across multiple texts allow students to thoroughly demonstrate reading comprehension as defined by the entirety of the reading standards. This type of reading is also essential when conducting research, when students build and present knowledge through integration, comparison, and synthesis of ideas. (p. 7)

Boyles (2012/2013) recommends using shorter, more complex text to read and analyze. Shanahan (2012, 2013) calls for close “rereading” of these shorter pieces of text through several “readings.” A first reading is about figuring out what a text says; it might involve retelling or summarizing a text or drawing out important key details. A second reading might involve a total rereading or partial reading aimed at going beyond what the text says into figuring out how particular text aspects work (e.g., figurative language, quality of evidence). A third reading goes even deeper into the text—it asks questions such as, “What does this text even mean? What is the author’s point? How does it relate to my own experiences?” Close reading is an intensive analysis of text to “come to terms with what it says, how it says it, and what it means” (Shanahan, 2012, p. 2).

Boyles (2012/2013) recommends two main activities surrounding the reading of shorter, more complex pieces of text. First, educators must build students’ capacity for independently comprehending a text through close reading. This means going beyond “ho-hum” questions to those that require literal and inferential thinking that integrates knowledge and ideas and is based on craft and structure (e.g., “Why does the author do the following?; What stands out about the way this sentence is written?”). Second, students need to take what they learn “from the study of one text and apply it to the next text they read” (p. 3). They should ask themselves questions such as, “What is the author telling me here? Are there any hard or important words? What does the author want me to understand? How does the author play with language to add meaning?” (p. 4).



Finally, Fisher et al. (2012) concur with the aforementioned recommendations related to reading shorter, more focused and complex text. They recommend rereading, reading with a pencil, noticing items that are confusing, discussing the text with others, and responding to text-dependent questions.

Close reading for informational text involves careful reading to gather important information to extend knowledge; increased emphasis has been placed on this type of text to avoid the “fourth-grade slump” (see Maloch & Bomer, 2013 for a discussion of informational text and reading-to-learn initiatives). Academic literacy includes a heavier emphasis on informational text as well as advanced narrative text (Kamil et al., 2008; Kosanovich, Reed, & Miller, 2010; Torgesen et al., 2007). Academic literacy also involves the kind of reading necessary to tackle state-level reading assessments, including the ability to make inferences from text, determine word meaning from context, compare texts, and summarize main ideas.

Informational text requires the need for reading-to-learn strategies. Lee and Spratley (2010) and Fang (2012) recommend instructional routines before, during, and after reading informational text. These routines might include, but would not be limited to, reciprocal teaching (with predicting, clarifying, summarizing, and generating questions as routine mainstays), journaling/note taking, KWL and graphic organizers, marking in text, anticipation guides/objectives, self-questioning strategies, and analyzing question types. These instructional routines are appropriate for more advanced types of narrative text as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUMMARY

We recommend students who struggle with reading should continue to participate in general education coursework that includes an emphasis on complex text (informational text and literature) as they receive focused strategic (tier 2) or intensive (tier 3 or 4) interventions. These interventions should include text experiences provided at each student’s independent or instructional reading level. Wilhelm (2012) echoed important recommendations on promoting middle school success within the CCSS.

First, to the maximum extent possible, we should ramp up our efforts in giving these students increased opportunities to read and interact with complex text. Complex text that proves to be too difficult to access (based on qualitative dimensions, quantitative measures, and reader and task considerations) can still be accessed through shared reading experiences (with general education classes or interventions that target oral reading opportunities for those who can actually decode

the text at higher levels). The goal is to continue solid and focused work on decoding using text at the instructional and independent reading levels while keeping students engaged in rich and deep classroom discussion surrounding more complex text. Students should be given opportunities to read parts of text they can decode with relative ease.

Second, we should include a focus on the background knowledge of students, getting them interested in the topic beforehand and seeing connections based on their own experiences and other texts they've read.

Third, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of practice. Students need repeated opportunities to read content-area, informational, and literary text and to "do something with these texts."

Fourth, we should utilize short reading selections that are worthy of study. Students should read and reread these excerpts with varying purposes.

Fifth, reading with a pencil is a critical component of any literacy class in which students learn to take notes based on what they are reading. They should clarify confusing words and information.

Sixth, students should discuss text in-depth and learn to ask deep questions based upon what they or others read. Some questions might be "right there," others involve a "think and search," still others are "author and you" oriented or "on your own" based (see QAR [question-answer relationships] within the Fisher et al., 2012 text for clarification).

Finally, students should have repeated opportunities to practice what they've learned in intervention-based reading classes within textbooks, novels, and informational journal/magazine/online articles. The goal of any remedial reading or special education teacher should be to move students into the kinds of materials more often enjoyed by typical peers who do not receive reading interventions and supports while still keeping them in general education coursework and content.



REFERENCES

- ACT, Inc. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.
- Boyles, N. (2012/2013). Closing in on close reading. *Educational Leadership*, 70, 36–41.
- Brozo, W. G. (2009). Response to intervention or responsive instruction? Challenges and possibilities of response to intervention for adolescent literacy. *Journal of Adolescent Literacy*, 53, 277–281.
- Cassidy, J., & Grote-Garcia, S. (2013). Common core state standards top the 2014 what's hot, what's not survey. *Reading Today*, 31(1), 12–16.
- Carnegie Corporation of New York. (2010). *Advancing adolescent literacy: The cornerstone of school reform*. New York, NY: Author.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2012). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects and Appendix A*. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards> and http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf
- Fang, Z. (2012). Language correlates of disciplinary literacy. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 32, 19–34.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012a). *Engaging the adolescent learner: Text complexity and close readings*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2012b, January). Text complexity. *Principal Leadership*, 62–64.
- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Text complexity: Raising rigor in reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Greenleaf, C. L., & Hinchman, K. (2009). Reimagining our inexperienced adolescent readers: From struggling, striving, marginalized and reluctant to thriving. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 53, 4–13.
- Hiebert, E. (2012). The Common Core State Standards and text complexity: What librarians need to know...and do. *Teacher Librarian*, 39, 13–19.
- International Reading Association. (2012). *Adolescent literacy: A position statement of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: Author.
- International Reading Association and National Middle School Association. (2002). *Supporting young adolescent literacy learning*. Newark, DE/Westerville, OH: Authors.
- Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., & Torgesen, J. (2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A Practice Guide (NCEE #2008-4027)*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>.

- Kosanovich, M. L., Reed, D. K., & Miller, D. H. (2010). *Bringing literacy strategies into content instruction: Professional learning for secondary-level teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.
- Lee, C. D., & Spratley, A. (2010). *Reading in the disciplines: The challenges of adolescent literacy*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.
- Maloch, B., & Bomer, R. (2013). Informational texts and the Common Core Standards: What are we talking about, anyway? *Language Arts*, 90, 205–213.
- Marchand-Martella, N. E., Martella, R. C., Modderman, S. L., Petersen, H., & Pan, S. (2013). Key areas of effective adolescent literacy programs. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 36, 161–184.
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2013). *A first look: 2013 mathematics and reading [NCES 2014–451]*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2007). *Adolescent literacy: A policy research brief*. Urbana, IL: Author.
- National Governors Association. (2005). *Reading to achieve: A governor's guide to adolescent literacy*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). (2007). *What content-area teachers should know about adolescent literacy*. Retrieved from http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/publications/adolescent_literacy07.pdf
- Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC, 2011). *PARCC model content frameworks: English language arts/literacy. Grades 3–11*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Shanahan, T. (2012). What is close reading? Retrieved from <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html>
- Shanahan, T. (2013, Fall). Letting the text take center stage: How the Common Core State Standards will transform English Language Arts instruction. *American Educator*, 4–11, 43.
- Snow, C. & Moje, E. (2010). Why is everyone talking about adolescent literacy? *Kappan*, 91(6), 66–69.
- Torgesen, J. K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L. M., Decker, S. M., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., ...Lesaux, N. (2007). *Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.
- Wilhelm, J. D. (2012). Proactivity versus reactivity: Preparing students for success with the CCSS. *Voices from the Middle*, 20, 68–72.
- Zygouris-Coe, V. (2012a). Disciplinary literacy and the Common Core State Standards. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 32, 35–50.



