

# Text Complexity

*To get students reading sufficiently advanced texts, teachers will need to consider students' background knowledge, vocabulary, and writing structures.*

**By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey**

**Douglas Fisher** ([dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:dfisher@mail.sdsu.edu)) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, CA.

**Nancy Frey** ([nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:nfrey@mail.sdsu.edu)) is a professor of teacher education at San Diego State University and a teacher leader at Health Sciences High and Middle College.

*They are the authors of Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives (2012, Solution Tree).*



## Watch the Video!

Watch a teacher engage students in a close reading of a complex text.

[www.nassp.org/pl0112fisher](http://www.nassp.org/pl0112fisher)

**A**s school leaders begin to assume increased responsibility for meeting the expectations outlined in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), many are asking about the requirement that students read “hard texts.” Anchor standard number 10 for reading indicates that students should “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 10). This is a tall order and may have unintended consequences if not addressed carefully. For example, to meet this standard, teachers could simply assign hard texts for students to read at home. Although that won’t ensure that students comprehend the assigned text, it could represent a significant change if current practices ask students to read texts that pose little challenge. But simply assigning texts will not ensure that students are college and career ready, nor will it make them any more likely to perform well on assessments designed to measure their reading proficiency.

Without a doubt, the CCSS have raised the bar for reading difficulty. School leaders over the next few years will need to guide their faculties as they select more-complex texts while ensuring that those texts are taught well. And nearly every teacher in secondary schools faces the issue of text complexity because students are expected to read complex pieces of text in every subject, not just English. To lead this effort, principals must understand what text complexity involves.

## A New Definition of Text Complexity

In the past, text complexity has

been estimated on the basis of the average length of sentences and the number of syllables in words. Those measures provided teachers with general information about readability and were used to gauge appropriate independent reading materials for students. Secondary school teachers often complained that those measures missed the nuances present in many texts, often reporting texts as being easier than they really were: works by Ernest Hemingway, for example, would range from fourth- to eighth-grade difficulty. Yet any teacher who has used Hemingway’s work knows that the concepts, dialogue, and background knowledge needed to understand the texts make them far more complex than the readability formula can measure.

To address this issue, the CCSS document identifies three inter-related aspects of text complexity: qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis, and matching readers with texts and tasks. The authors define each of these as follows:

*Qualitative evaluation of the text:* Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.

*Quantitative evaluation of the text:* Readability measures and other scores of text complexity.

*Matching reader to the text and task:* Reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed). (Common Core State

Standards Initiative, 2010, p. 57)

These are helpful categories for teachers to consider as they select texts to use in their classrooms, but teachers still need instructional guidance to build their students' comprehension of the texts.

### WHAT TO TEACH RELATED TO TEXT COMPLEXITY

The definitions of factors that make a text difficult do not provide much direction in terms of instructional intervention to ensure that students develop their ability to read increasingly complex text. Thankfully, there are things that teachers can do to increase students' ability to read at or above grade level. This is important because students must be able to read texts before they can learn anything from them: there is no evidence that students can learn from books they can't read (Allington, 2002).

### Background Knowledge

One of the greatest predictors of reading comprehension is background knowledge. Simply said, how much a reader already knows about a topic will significantly influence whether or not the reader understands the text. We addressed background knowledge in our December 2010 column ([www.principals.org/pl1210fisher](http://www.principals.org/pl1210fisher)) and noted that wide reading has been documented as one way to build students stores of knowledge. In other words, teachers should have students reading related texts regularly, both in class and at home. These should be texts that they are able to read so that topical knowledge is built.

For example, Ms. Grant has the students in her Physics class read for 10 minutes of each period. They don't

get to read anything that they want to read. Instead, she has collected readings that are related to the topics she teaches and that span wide reading levels. Students select these independent readings each day and then share the ideas and information they gathered from the texts with one another. She also uses independent reading to build technical writing skills. When her class was focused on developing hypotheses, she provided students with transcripts from local scientists who had been interviewed about how they develop their hypotheses. In addition, students were invited to read lab reports from previous classes to gain a greater understanding about the studies that they could conduct as part of the independent research requirement.

### Vocabulary

In many cases, hard texts contain hard words. These multisyllabic words increase complexity according to traditional readability measures that use the number of syllables per sentence. But it is an imperfect method. First, there are many short words that are conceptually very difficult for students, such as *fauna*, *mode*, *opt*, and *apt*. Second, many words have multiple meanings. Although most students will know what a *plate* is, fewer understand how that word works in *plate tectonics*. What about the difference in the meaning of the word *vessel* when used in science and in history? Third, these measures do not consider that phrases can be more difficult than individual words. Students can get lost in such phrases as "filled with envy" or "brimming with pride," not to mention figurative language and idioms. Students may not understand why people may be "green with envy" or



"seeing red." Although the individual words in "kicked the bucket" are easy to understand, the entire phrase may be unfamiliar.

Simply assigning words for students to learn and then testing them on those words will not improve vocabulary knowledge. Instead, teachers must carefully select words worthy of instruction. There are all kinds of ways of engaging students in high-quality vocabulary learning that involves students' active use of the words in their interactions with their peers as well as in their writing. Simply said, students do not develop deep word learning without opportunities for repeated use of the word.

In addition, teachers should develop students' habits of word solving. As noted in the CCSS, students should learn how to use context clues, word parts or morphology, and resources to uncover the meaning of unknown words. To ensure that students develop this habit, teachers

have to provide models for students. We devoted the November 2010 issue of this column ([www.nassp.org/pl1110fisher](http://www.nassp.org/pl1110fisher)) to effective modeling. In the area of word solving, teachers should regularly model the use of context clues, word parts, and resources as they read complex pieces of text.

### Text Structures and Coherence

In addition to the background knowledge assumptions and vocabulary demands, complex texts typically deploy sophisticated sentence structures, often in the form of dependent clauses. These phrases and clauses increase the demand on the readers' working memory and require that the reader make connections within the text to understand the point the author is making.

When teachers model their understanding of these types of sentences, students can learn to understand them as well. Unfortunately, in too many classrooms, the texts used for modeling are not complex enough to provide teachers opportunities to model this aspect of reading. In addition, teachers may be working in their expert blind spot, neglecting to model their understanding of sentence structures because they fully understand the sentence and forgetting that

novices may not.

In addition to modeling, requiring students to revise their writing to include increasingly complex sentences will give them opportunities to focus on this aspect of text construction. As they do so, they will begin to notice the same structures in the texts they read. After all, writers hone their craft in part because they read a lot and appropriate the structures of other writers.

In addition to the structures used in complex texts, coherence can be challenging for some readers. Coherence involves the connections that the author makes between words, ideas, sentences, and paragraphs. Some authors use numerous pronouns, synonyms, and references to other writings to connect ideas across a text. The number and types of these can make a seemingly appropriate text very complex instead. Again, modeling and wide reading influence students' attention to coherence. In addition, teachers will likely have to address coherence issues intentionally and specifically if students are to develop and use this knowledge. Coherence is one of the undertaught aspects of reading and one that deserves much more attention if students are going to read the texts required of them in college or the workplace.

### Conclusion

Every reader enjoys reading a wide range of texts. If you take a look at what you have read over the past month, some of it was very easy, entertaining even. Some of it was required, and some of it was choice. Some of it was even hard and required your sustained attention. This is exactly what school leaders should see when they visit classrooms. Students should have a varied reading diet that includes informational texts that they can read and that they choose to read because they want to know something. This diet should include reading for pleasure, both fiction and nonfiction. It should include reading literature to answer life's big questions and to learn about other people. And it should include texts that are hard, but worthy. Importantly, when students struggle with a specific reading and then reach a new level of understanding, their pride soars. We all like a good challenge, and we all need support to get there. **PL**

### REFERENCES

- Allington, R. L. (2002). You can't learn much from books you can't read. *Educational Leadership*, 60(3), 16–19.
- Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. Retrieved from: [www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI\\_ELA%20Standards.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

### RESOURCE

- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Word wise and content rich: Five essential steps to teaching academic vocabulary*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Advertiser's Index			PAGE
ASCD	800-933-ASCD	<a href="http://www.ascd.org">www.ascd.org</a>	3
Pepperdine University	866-503-5467	<a href="http://gsep.pepperdine.edu">http://gsep.pepperdine.edu</a>	10
Preferred Educational Software	815-332-1626	<a href="http://www.pes-sports.com">www.pes-sports.com</a>	34
Seton Hall University	800-313-9833	<a href="http://www.shu.edu/academics/education">www.shu.edu/academics/education</a>	40
Solution Tree	800-733-6786	<a href="http://solution-tree.com">solution-tree.com</a>	C2