

For the CCSS Assessments and Beyond: Develop Your Students' Stamina for Grappling with Complex Texts

by Elfrieda H. Hiebert

The inclusion of a standard on text complexity represents the most unique of several distinguishing features of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. By reading texts at ever-accelerating complexity levels over a school career, students are expected to be proficient with the texts of college and careers upon high school graduation. Teachers are working vigorously to identify how to best apply this standard to their daily classroom instruction.

However, in the frenzy over ensuring that classroom texts are complex enough, little attention has been paid to the contexts in which students' reading of these complex texts will be assessed. A key distinction between assessment and instruction is what students are asked to *do* with texts.

In many elementary and even middle school classrooms, teachers read a new text aloud to students. In subsequent lessons, teachers often set the pace and content of students' reading of texts. That isn't going to happen during assessment. In the assessment context, students will need to read these texts on their own—an activity that existing evidence indicates is challenging for many students (Hiebert et al, 2010). Further, students must use evidence from what they have read to respond to questions and to write essays.

We can get a glimpse of the scope of this new challenge by examining the sample texts of the two new assessment consortia—Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Table 1 provides a summary of time and task features of the assessments. Already at third grade, students are expected to spend considerable time reading on their own.

Assessment Texts: Much Harder?

The presence of a new standard on text complexity raises the question of how much harder the assessment texts will be from the typical texts of classrooms. Figure 1 shows that assessment texts follow the quantitative progression of the CCSS staircase of text complexity. SBAC texts have slightly lower Lexiles than PARCC texts, but remember that the sample is small. The texts of both assessments have slightly higher Lexiles than those of core-reading texts (Scott Foresman's *Reading Street* and Harcourt's *Storytown*) but the Lexiles fall within the appropriate grade-band ranges in Appendix A of the CCSS.

Because of the strong relationship between vocabulary and comprehension, profiles of vocabulary in the assessment and instructional texts are also provided (see Figure 2). These profiles convey an oft-overlooked feature of complex texts: core vocabulary accounts for most of the words in texts—typically 90% or more. The only case where the percentage of core vocabulary is less than 90%—SBAC Grades 6–8—involves informational text, but even here the percentage of core vocabulary is high (88%). For all other texts, whether assessment or instructional or grade 3 or 6, the percentage of core vocabulary is fairly consistent (92–94%).

The texts of Grades 3 and 6 of the core-reading program have similar levels of rare vocabulary as the assessment texts. Further, the vocabulary loads in the core-reading programs are similar in Grades 3 and 6. Most students can recognize the majority of words in texts, even by the end of second grade, but many are not automatic enough in recognizing words to sustain comprehension (Cummings et al, 2011). When third graders encounter rare vocabulary at the same rate as sixth graders, it's a challenge to develop automaticity with vocabulary.

Figure 1.
Texts of Sample Assessments and Core Reading Programs Relative to Staircase of Text Complexity

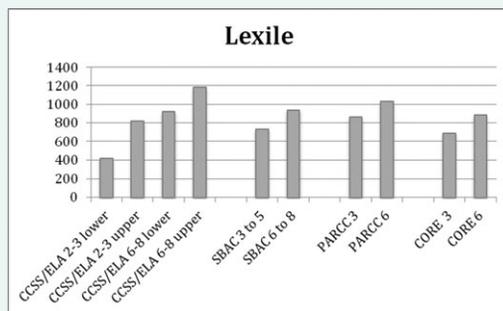


Figure 2.
Distribution of Core and Rare Vocabulary for Texts of Sample Assessments and Core Reading Programs

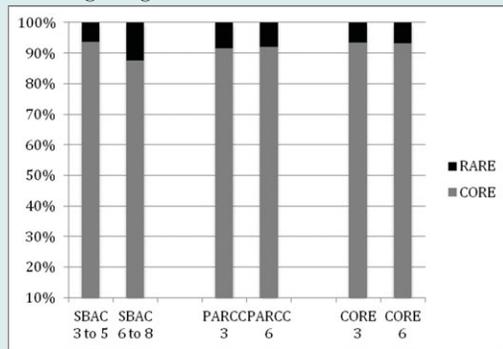


Table 1 gives information on the length of the assessment texts. Grade 3 assessment texts average 575 words, while Grade 6 texts average 675 words. Instructional texts average 950 (Grade 3) and 2,000 words (Grade 6). These differences in length can mean up to 27 more rare words for third graders and 93 more rare words for sixth graders in the average instructional text than in the average assessment text. With fewer total words and fewer rare words, it could even be argued that the assessment texts could present less of a challenge to students than instructional texts.

Tailoring Instruction for Student Success

In most cases core-reading texts are, in fact, complex enough for the majority of students—if not too complex. What are missing in many classrooms are not texts that contain an appropriate amount of complexity but rather the opportunities for students to be responsible for instructional texts and to read enough to be highly facile with these texts. What students aren't learning is how to interact with challenging texts by themselves.

Teachers should not rush to remove all instructional scaffolds but they need to remember that scaffolds are intended to be temporary and steadily withdrawn. Students need to be instructed in how to handle texts on new topics with challenging vocabulary. They need to be instructed in monitoring their comprehension. How can teachers make this happen?

- **Make students responsible for the first reads of texts.** This reading can occur in chunks, with teachers asking a purpose-setting question that requires students to find evidence in text. What is important is that the chunks get bigger over a school year.
- **Ensure that students reread critical parts of texts to demonstrate evidence for their interpretations.** Ask students to read their evidence for the purpose-setting question to a partner, with pairs sharing their evidence.
- **Conduct vocabulary lessons that uncover the critical vocabulary in texts prior to reading.** A short lesson on Ojibwa vocabulary prior to reading *The Birchbark House* or Yorkshire dialect prior to reading *The Secret Garden* illustrates how to support students' success when reading text on their own.
- **Hold explicit conversations with students about the role of challenge in learning.** Teachers need to draw students' attention to their proficiency with the majority of the words in texts and the pace at which new, potentially unknown words are included. The patterns of rare vocabulary in text need to be made visible to students.
- **Help students develop comprehension strategies to use when the task becomes difficult.** The vast majority of students know the majority of words in texts. What students often lack are strategies for proceeding when they encounter unknown words.

Preparing students for contexts where they are responsible for texts is not about test preparation. Ensuring that students are continually increasing their stamina in reading and responding to text is as essential to college and career readiness as ensuring that texts increase in their complexity over students' school careers.

Table 1.
Contexts and Text Complexity of Assessments

	PARCC	SBAC
Number and Length of Sessions	<p><i>End-of-Year:</i> 60 min. x 2 sessions (Gr. 3) to 70 min. x 2 sessions (Gr. 9–11)</p> <p><i>Performance:</i> 40–60 min. per task (Gr. 3) to 50–85 min. per task (Gr. 9–11)</p>	<p><i>Computer Adaptive Testing:</i> 1 hr. 45 min. (Gr. 3–8) to 2 hr. (Gr. 9–11)</p> <p><i>Performance:</i> 105 min. (Gr. 3–8) to 120 min. (Gr. 9–11)</p>
Text Length	<p>200–800 words (Gr. 3–5); 400–1000 words (Gr. 6–8)</p> <p>500–1500 words (Gr. 9–11)</p>	<p>650 words (Gr. 3)</p> <p>750 words (Gr. 4–5)</p> <p>950 words (Gr. 6–8)</p> <p>1100 words (Gr. 9–11)</p>

Summarized from K. Wixson (April 19, 2013). *Assessment and instruction in the era of the CCSS in English Language Arts*. Presentation given at the Preconvention Institute “Assessment in the Era of the Common Core.” San Antonio, TX. Retrieved from: http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwlychIT3ICqgScYP0LWmSpjk1B_VqcGC

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