



What is Text Complexity?

Thomas DeVere Wolsey, Dana L. Grisham & Elfrieda H. Hiebert

Overview

Read and Learn

Activity 1

Read foundation material:

- *Common Core State Standards, Appendix A* (2010b), pp. 2–15
- *Reading Between the Lines* (ACT, 2006), pp. 1–27

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2

Respond to the purpose-setting questions.

Analyze and Apply

Activity 3

Analyze the two foundation readings (*CCSS Appendix A, Reading Between the Lines*) using the “staircase” of text complexity.

Activity 4

Read *7 Actions that Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity* (Heibert, 2012) and compare this article to the two foundation readings.

Activity 5

Apply what you know about text complexity to supplemental texts from two grade bands (4–5 or 9–10).

Background

Text levels have typically been addressed indirectly within past generations of standards documents. For example, a standard might describe fifth graders as needing to identify figurative language in “grade-level” but grade-level text was not defined. Readability estimates were of some help; however, they are limited measures that cannot fully capture the complexity of a novel or expository text. By contrast, Standard 10 of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010a) turns the spotlight of the English/language arts standards to ensuring an increase in students’ ability to comprehend more and more complex text across their school careers.



Key Terms

CCR: An acronym for “College and Career Ready” and refers to the idea that standards should be aligned with and prepare students for college and work expectations. College and career readiness builds in “steady and increasing complexity of texts and tasks.” (CCSS, Appendix A, 2010b, p. 2).

Close reading: Close reading is characterized by the use of evidence from the text to support, analysis, conclusions, or views of texts. For example, responses to the definition of text complexity would begin with a reference to the place in the text where the term is defined.

Lexile: A Lexile measure is a valuable piece of information about either an individual’s reading ability or the difficulty of a text, like a book or magazine article. The Lexile measure is shown as a number with an “L” after it—880L is 880 Lexile (MetaMetrics, 2012).

Readability measures: Over the last several decades, a number of measures have been devised to quantitatively estimate the difficulty of texts intended for student use. These include the Fry Readability Estimate, Flesch-Kincaid, and others. Each estimates readability, typically in terms of grade level, based on a variety of factors such as sentence length, word length, or a count of words that are more or less frequent in the English language. Additional examples are available [here](#).

Staircase: The staircase represents the idea, embedded in the Common Core State Standards (2010a), that the texts students are asked to read and the tasks related to them are increasingly and steadily more complex and challenging.

The Activities

Read and Learn

Activity 1

In this module, you will learn what factors and features make text complex for reading and apply close reading techniques.

Purpose-Setting Questions

1. How do the CCSS standards define text complexity?
2. What does the “text complexity band” mean?
3. What are the three factors for “measuring” text complexity?

Reading

Read sections on text complexity within the *Common Core State Standards, Appendix A* (2010b, pp. 2–15), and a portion of *Reading Between the Lines* (ACT, 2006) (pp. 1–27). *Reading Between the Lines* served as an impetus for the Standards’ em-

phasis on college and career readiness. As you read, you may want to make notes in the margins and highlight key areas of the text using a paper copy of the readings or using digital annotation tools (e.g., Evernote, Adobe Reader, any of several apps for tablet computers). The [SOAPSTone](#) (Morse, 2012) strategy from the College Board may provide a guide for your annotations.

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2

Complete the chart below to respond to the purpose-setting questions. Note page numbers and key words that support your responses. You may use “**CCSSA**” as an annotation code for *CCSS Appendix A* and “**ACT**” for *Reading Between the Lines*.

| Purpose-Setting Question | Evidence (Note source, page number, and key words or phrases) |
|--|---|
| How do the CCSS standards define text complexity? Response: | |
| What does the “text complexity band” mean? Response: | |
| What are the three factors for “measuring” text complexity? Response: | |

Working in a small group of three or four, compare your responses with those of your colleagues. Add any information that would improve your initial response. Your instructor may ask you to post your responses in an online discussion forum.

Analyze and Apply

Activity 3

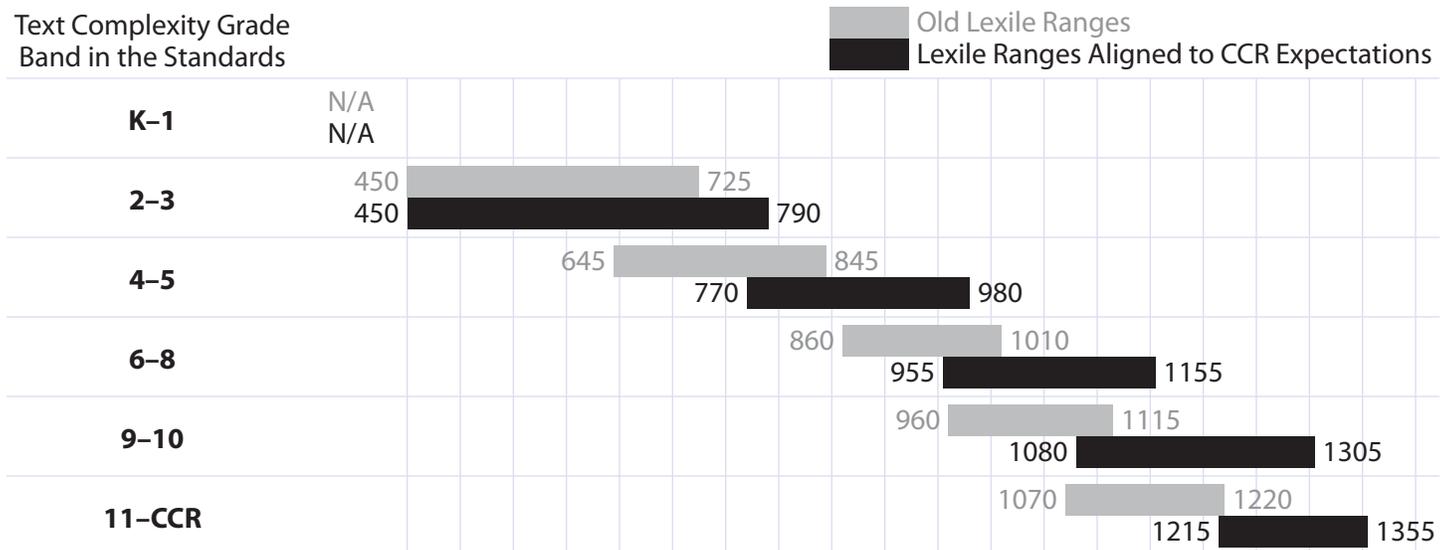
Now that you have read to establish a foundational definition of text complexity, we will apply the ideas found there to the two texts, *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines*, plus one other of your choice.

Working in a small group, use these questions to examine the complexity of *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines*.

- Were particular sections more challenging to comprehend than other sections?
- Where do you believe these two texts fall on the staircase of text complexity on page 8 of the *CCSS Appendix A* (reproduced in Figure 1 below)? Your best hypothesis is just fine at this time.

Figure 1

The “Staircase”—Text Complexity Grade Bands and Associated Lexile Ranges (in Lexiles)



Source: *Common Core State Standards, Appendix A* (2010b), p. 8

- How does the complexity of these texts compare to the complexity of other professional articles or books you have read recently?

Activity 4

Once you have made your hypotheses about *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines*, please read an article on text complexity written for teachers: *7 Actions that Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity* (Hiebert, 2012). Using the questions below as a guide for discussion, work with a group of your colleagues. Your instructor may ask you to write your answers in note form on a poster or to post them in an online discussion forum.

- How is the information on text complexity in the *7 Actions* article the same or different from the information in the *CCSS*?
- What features of the *7 Actions* article make it easier or less complex than the *CCSS Appendix A* and *Reading Between the Lines* documents?
- Are there any ways in which *7 Actions* is harder than the other two documents?

Table 1 provides information on the difficulty of these texts. Compare these figures to those of the grade bands on page 8 of *CCSS Appendix A* (also shown here in Figure 1). Hiebert modeled the *7 Actions* article after magazines such as *Educational Leadership*, which have a commitment to making educational research accessible to educators.

- What is gained by making texts more readable for readers?
- Are there commensurate losses?

Table 1**Features of Texts for Teachers on Text Complexity**

| Text | Lexile | Mean Sentence Length | Mean Word Frequency |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>CCSS Appendix A</i> (pp. 2–15) | 1640 | 28.74 | 3.04 |
| <i>Reading Between the Lines</i> (pp. 1–27) | 1520 | 25.25 | 3.11 |
| <i>7 Actions That Teachers Can Take Right Now: Text Complexity</i> | 1240 | 19.43 | 3.33 |

Activity 5

In Activity 4, we developed an understanding about how texts can vary in their complexity, even for proficient readers. Activity 5 extends this understanding to texts read by students in kindergarten through grade 12. The means of studying these demands are considered in comparisons with texts identified in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (2010c) as exemplary at different grade levels. Texts for two grade levels representing distinctive periods of reading and thinking development are our focus: One set for Grades 4–5 and another set for Grades 9–10. Readability information for the two texts for each grade band is given in Table 2 below.

Selections from each text are included in this module’s Supplemental Readings for you to use as a reference. You will work with a small group of about four participants. Choose a grade band (9–10 or 4–5) and review the information in Table 2, then examine the text selections that correspond to each text. Your instructor may ask you to divide your group in half with some group members analyzing one text while the other half of the group analyzes the other text.

- What proficiencies do readers need to have to comprehend these texts? Proficiencies are cognitive skills readers bring to bear when they approach texts, particularly those that are complex relative to their age, developmental levels, and experiences as readers. These proficiencies include summarizing, predicting, visualizing, and so forth.
- What proficiencies might teachers want to teach with these texts to support students’ increasing capacity to read complex texts?
- What are the differences in the demands of the texts for readers? Are the texts at a grade level equally complex?

Table 2**Readability Features of Exemplar Texts from the Common Core State Standards: Grades 4–5 and 9–10**

| Exemplars from the CCSS | Grade Band | Lexile | Mean Sentence Length | Mean Word Frequency |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>“Gift of the Magi”</i> | 9–10 | 880 | 13.3 | 3.5 |
| <i>Metamorphosis</i> | 9–10 | 1360 | 26.1 | 3.6 |
| <i>The Black Stallion</i> | 4–5 | 690 | 10.24 | 3.53 |
| <i>Secret Garden</i> | 4–5 | 1190 | 16.52 | 3.15 |

- What features of a text might challenge readers?

Compare the text features you found in the selection with the Lexile, mean sentence length, and mean word frequency information in Table 2. Develop a list of proficiencies that readers would need for each selection. Prepare an example from the text selection to support the proficiencies you identify. Two or three proficiencies should be enough. Compare your list with those of the other half of your group. Note similarities and differences using your examples to support your findings.

Looking Ahead

Keep what you have learned in this module in mind as we move on to Module 2—the consideration of the pros and cons of readability formulas.

References

ACT. (2006). *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading*. Retrieved from <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/reports/reading.html>

Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). (2010a). *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf

Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). (2010b). Appendix A: Research supporting key elements of the standards; Glossary of key terms. In *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf

Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS). (2010b). Appendix B: Text exemplars and sample performance tasks. In *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. Retrieved from http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf

Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996. CITATION TO COME

Hiebert, E. H. (2012). 7 actions teachers can take to increase students' capacity with complex text. Retrieved from <http://textproject.org/library/presentations/7-actions-teachers-can-take-to-increase-students-capacity-with-complex-text/> NEED UPDATED CITATION

Metametrics. (2012). *What is a Lexile® Measure?* Retrieved from <http://lexile.com/about-lexile/lexile-overview/>

Morse, O. (2012). *SOAPStone: A Strategy for Reading and Writing*. The College Board. Retrieved from http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/preap/teachers_corner/45200.html

Williamson, (2008). CITATION TO COME

Literature Cited

Henry, O. (1994). Gift of the Magi, The. In A. Vaill (Ed.) *O. Henry: Selected Short Stories* (pp. 163–167). New York, NY: Book of the Month Club.